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# SWIMMER

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## KNOCKING ON DEATH'S DOOR

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A photograph of three swimmers in the water, wearing wetsuits and swim caps. The water is calm with gentle ripples. The background is a soft, hazy sky, suggesting early morning or late afternoon light. The swimmers are positioned in the lower half of the frame, with one in the foreground and two slightly behind and to the right.

# *Knocking on* **Death's Door**

An open water adventure

BY DAVID MCGLYNN PHOTOS MIKE POWLEY

It was 6:30 in the morning, the last Saturday in August, and I was up to my knees in Lake Michigan, at the far northeastern tip of Wisconsin's Door County Peninsula. Along with four other USMS swimmers—Peter Allen, 53, of Neenah, Wis., Scott Powley, 51, also from Neenah, Peter Holzwarth, 47, of Luxemburg, Wis., and Julie Van Cleave, 53, of Brookfield, Wis., as well as Julie's 15-year-old son, Kevin—I stared across Death's Door, the notorious 4-mile channel of deep water, rocky shoals, and outpost islands that joins Lake Michigan to Green Bay. Washington Island, our destination, hovered like a mirage on the horizon, barely visible through the fog. It looked like a long way to swim, and it was.

The Arni J. Richter, the 100-foot steel-hulled ferry that runs between Door County and Washington Island, sat hunkered against the dock. Washington Island was hosting the first ever Death's Door Barbecue Festival, and cars and foot passengers had lined up for the first departure, even though the ferry didn't leave for another hour. They watched us from the dock, their hands shading their eyes from the sun just rising over the lake. The looks on their faces said we were nuts.

We zipped our wetsuits and stretched bright neon caps over our heads. Peter Allen tugged at the collar of his wetsuit and leaned into me. "I don't know about these suits," he said. "We should have used lard. Like the swimmers in the English Channel."





“This isn’t the Channel,” I said. “This is Death’s Door.”

“Too late now,” he said. He dove in and glided away from the beach. I lowered my goggles, took one last deep breath, and followed him into the water.

#### Birth of an Open Water Swim

**Most open water** races begin with a small band of swimmers standing on a beach, eyeing a distant shoreline, drawn by the challenge and the potential for danger. The La Jolla Rough Water, for example, began in 1916, when seven swimmers dove into the Pacific at Scripps Pier and washed ashore at La Jolla Cove nearly two hours later, in the process crossing two submarine canyons that plunge to nearly 900 feet deep. Nearly a century after its inauguration, La Jolla attracts nearly 2,000 swimmers a year.

Open-water swimming in the Great Lakes is a more recent phenomenon, but the swims begin the same way: a group of swimmers, a wild idea, a beach to swim from and a shore to swim toward. In 2006, Scott Armstrong, director of the Bayfield Recreation Center in Bayfield, Wis., commenced a 2.1-mile community swim in Lake Superior, from the ferry terminal in Bayfield to the little village of La Pointe on Madeline Island, the largest of the popular Apostle Islands. Twenty-three of the 24 who attempted the swim made it across.

“I was terrified the first year,” Armstrong says. “We

required every swimmer to have a kayak escort. But then I realized that open water swimmers are safer and stronger than I first thought. So, the next year, we organized a race. A lot of people were eager to spend a weekend in Bayfield, and there’s something magical about swimming to an island in Lake Superior.”

The Point to La Pointe Swim, as it’s now known, has quickly become one of the most popular open water races in the Upper Midwest, drawing more than 450 competitors each year.

Knowing the popularity of the Bayfield swim, we believed that if our swim went well, it had the potential to become an organized event. “The name itself brings a certain cachet, much like Alcatraz does on the West Coast,” Peter Allen says. “I see Death’s Door as the Alcatraz of the Midwest. But in many respects it’s more challenging because the distance is nearly twice as long.”

I wrote to the Madison-based distillery, Death’s Door Spirits, to inquire about the possibility of them sponsoring us, and they happily sent us a few boxes of SWAG. Once I told friends about our intent to make the swim, I began to get emails from people across the country, wondering if a race was in the works. “I hope so,” I replied. But we had to swim it first.

The Invincible Lake **Lake Michigan** is known for dashing the dreams of long distance swimmers. In 1960, after

Alaskan Harry Briggs failed in his third attempt to swim across the lake, the *Chicago Tribune* declared Lake Michigan “invincible.” Swimmers successfully crossed the English Channel almost every week, the *Tribune* pointed out, but the lake remained unconquered. And just weeks before our swim, Sara and Jeff Tow came up short in their bid to swim across Lake Michigan from Two Rivers, Wis., to Ludington, Mich. After more than 30

hours in the water, and with 11 miles left to go, the Tows were declared too medically unstable to continue.

The 4.5 miles between Door County and Washington Island was far shorter, but when it comes to harsh Lake Michigan conditions, there aren’t many places quite like Death’s Door. Though it’s 130 feet deep at its deepest, the shores are aproned by shoals jagged enough to tear through a ship’s hull. The varied depths, combined with the merging of two large bodies of water, create a cauldron of shifting currents and seiches (wind-generated waves that can change water levels by several feet) famous for pushing boats off course.

According to the Wisconsin State Historical Society, Death’s Door is believed to be the site of a major battle between the Winnebago and Potawatomi Indians, during which an unexpected storm surge and a massive rogue

wave swept away hundreds of warriors. In the 19th century, the strait was the route of choice for merchants on their voyages around the Door Peninsula. Scattered among the green and red navigation markers dotting the waters of Death's Door are the bell-shaped mooring buoys of several drowned ships, bobbing like tombstones on the lake's surface. According to Milwaukee journalist Gregg Hoffmann, Death's Door is home to the largest collection of freshwater shipwrecks in the world and a perennial favorite among snorkelers and scuba divers.

As a former Californian, I was skeptical of rogue waves or the idea that Lake Michigan could ever get as rough as the Pacific Ocean. That is, until I saw it. Two weeks earlier, while camping on Rock Island, the northernmost island in the Potawatomi Islands, I'd watched a storm blow in at more than 60 miles per hour. The waves

grew so big that they washed over the dock, normally 10 feet above the water, large enough to shut down not only the passenger ferry herding campers from Washington to Rock Island, but also the larger car ferry between Washington Island and the mainland.

Death's Door is not for first-time or inexperienced open water swimmers. But others have made the swim before. The first recorded crossing was in 1953 by a Milwaukee man named Kenneth Givan. A former Merchant Marine during World War II, Givan started his swim from Gill's Rock, on the northwestern tip of the Door Peninsula—a distance 3 miles farther than our route. He made the 7-mile crossing in 6 hours and 30 minutes.

In 2010, Margaret Carroll, 52, now of Duluth, Minn., swam the strait from Washington Island back to the mainland. Margaret had swum the 110-mile circumference of the

Door County Peninsula the year before, yet says that crossing Death's Door was by far the more daunting challenge. She had to postpone the swim by a week because of inclement weather, and still found herself battling strong winds and currents on the day of the swim.

"The last mile took me across the deepest part of the channel," Carroll says. "The currents were moving strongly toward the east, and I had to work hard

to hold my route. I felt very small in that big water."

Carroll says an escort boat is a must for swimming Death's Door. Before her swim, Carroll consulted with the ferry captains and local fishermen who knew the water well, and she kept a close eye on the water temperatures and currents. "Crossing Death's Door requires confidence in your abilities," she says. "And patience. The weather up there can turn



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Three-time Olympic Gold Medalist

on a dime, and the lake can go from placid to dangerous in the blink of an eye. You have to show up knowing Lake Michigan might not cooperate.”

Through the Door **We had plenty** of confidence in our abilities to handle the distance. Patience, however, was another matter. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had forecast a steep drop in water temperatures, and with summer winding down, we only had the one weekend for the swim. We’d either make it now or wait till next year.

The day before we were set to go, conditions didn’t look promising. Rain and wind blew in and the waves were once again crashing against the docks. “We scouted the route in a boat just prior to the issuing of a small craft advisory,” Peter Allen recalls. “Nobody seemed able to predict what we should expect for currents. I

also had a concern about crossing the ferry lane and not being visible to the captain.”

“The winds were strong the day before and the wind blew hard all night,” recalls Julie Van Cleave. “I woke up several times the night before, listening to that wind and wondered if we were going to end up at the mini-golf course instead of in the water.”

But in the morning, the winds had died and the lake was remarkably flat. I was relieved to see fog shrouding the coast of Washington Island. Fog meant the winds were calm all the way across—at least for the moment.

A few strokes past the jetty, the water turned from blue-green to pitch black and I could practically feel the lake bottom fall away. When I breathed to my right, I could see tiny Pilot Island, where three 19th century schooners lay beneath the waves. I learned how the currents

work with an unseen force. I’d lift my head to find the chase boat getting too far off my left shoulder, try to correct, and wind up on its other side.

As soon as we rounded Plum Island, the halfway point, we found ourselves in the ferry lane. The crew on the escort boat sounded an air horn. When I lifted my head I saw the *Arni J. Richter* barreling right toward me. Besides the currents and water temperatures, boat traffic is perhaps the greatest danger to crossing Death’s Door. With the Death’s Door Barbecue Festival under way, and a blue sky overhead, the water was crowded with extra ferries, as well as with fishing and ski boats. The *Richter* glided by almost close enough to touch, and I was grateful I’d heeded the alarm from the escort boat. The passengers crowded along the rail on the observation deck waved to me. I lifted my arm to return the courtesy.

Given all the unpredictable factors, from the weather to the currents to the proximity of the ferries, crossing Death’s Door might not ever become an officially organized race. “It’s a race that would have a low chance of success from one year to the next,” Peter Holzwarth says. “Death’s Door might just be one of those swims that’s undertaken by small groups of yahoos looking to test themselves against Lake Michigan. Maybe that’s how it should be.”

And yet, when we climbed out of the water on Washington Island, a small crowd quickly formed around us. A woman with a camera slung around her neck approached us. She pointed at my Death’s Door Spirits T-shirt. “I love that shirt,” she said. “How can I get one?”

I pointed across the water to the distant shore from which we’d come, now barely a smear on the horizon. “You’ll have to swim for it,” I said. **S**



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