

▶▶ “Colonel, did you every doubt you would make it?”  
“There was a while there, yes,” answered the soldier in a quiet but strong American drawl.

In the 45 years since this exchange, no one else has ever stood on the shores of northern California and been asked that question, having succeeding in swimming from the Farallone Islands, roughly 30 miles west of San Francisco.

There are few islands or bodies of water less inviting for a swim than the Farallones. The islands, affectionately known as The Devil’s Teeth, sit at the northern-most point of the Red Triangle, an area recognized for some of the largest and most voracious great white sharks in the world.

If that is not enough to discourage recreational bathing, the islands were also a dumping site for radioactive waste, from 1946-1970.

Before this, the islands’ vast seabird population created a booming egg trade for the growing population of San Francisco in the mid-1800s, which culminated in the ‘Egg War’ between rival private companies, and effectively ended the private occupation of the Farallones in 1863.

The islands became a US National Marine Sanctuary in 1981, but it was in the 1960s that some of the world’s top marathon swimmers began showing the islands some love.

In 1963 a growing number of swimmers began boating out to the Farallones, before briefly stepping foot on the beach and splashing off towards the California coast but by 1964 15 had failed to complete the crossing.

In 1966 the famed English Channel swimmer, Ted Erikson, arrived in San Francisco to make his own attempt, on the heels of greats such as Leonore Modell, Greta Anderson and local legend, Ike Papke. Erikson fell in with the famed San Francisco Dolphin Club swimmers, whose ranks still know the waters of northern California better than anyone.

Despite a wealth of local knowledge Ted’s two attempts in 1966 failed, after admirable six- and ten-hour efforts.

The Hawaiian waterman Ike Papke waited until October of 1967 before making his attempt. Papke nearly topped them all, but he was stopped by severe hypothermia, just 1.1 miles from the mainland. As the 1966 attempts came to a close, one man was already well into his preparation to mount his own bid. That man was 40-year old Lt colonel Stewart Evans, stationed at the nearby Presidio military base.

A life-long swimmer, Lt colonel Evans was a US Army supply officer, who served in WWII, Korea and Vietnam. His 20-hour 1953 Catalina Channel crossing, combined with years of military discipline, had taught him the value of meticulous preparation and training, and he brought all that to bear on his Farallones attempt.

Evans’ intention to conquer the Farollone challenge was first made known to his wife, Pauline Worrell, in 1965.

At that time, Worrell, from Hull in Yorkshire, England, had been married to Evans for three years, and she recalls that when they first arrived that year in San Francisco, they stopped on the Golden Gate Bridge, and gazed out across the waters spread before them. Her husband’s gaze was fixed on a jagged collection of islands in the far distance.

“Stu pointed out to the Farallones,” recalls Worrell. “He casually commented, ‘That is a famous swim that no one has done, and I want to do it.’”

As part of his year-long training regimen, Evans would log lunchtime swims in front of the Dolphin Club, while pouring over nautical maps and tide charts in the evenings. At the height of his



Lt colonel Stewart Evans, clad in a 10lb cocktail of grease and liniment, pictured before he entered the water on his extraordinary Farollone islands swim

# OUT OF THE DEVIL’S TEETH

*Dodging great whites and giant jellyfish, in 1967 Colonel Stewart Evans became the first person to swim from the Farallone Islands to mainland California. His son-in-law, Bruckner Chase, tells the story...*

Farallone Arch



training he was in the water three hours per day, with a five-hour swim on Saturday followed by a seven-hour swim on Sunday. There are perhaps few better training grounds and comrades than those present in San Francisco Bay, and Evans made the most of both, completing swims from Alcatraz and back, Golden Gate Bridge to South City, and the San Francisco Lightship to Bolinas. By the time Evans stepped into the 13C waters of the Farallones at 10:17pm on 27 August he had left nothing to chance.

Evans and a full crew from the Dolphin Club arrived at the Farallones aboard their lead boat, the Water Queen, along with two rowboats, the USCG Auxiliary, Rita Banks, and the Crissy Flier, loaded with pilots, pacers, feeders and a physician. As a sign of a much different time they also had someone stationed at the bow of the boat with rifle in hand to deal with less than friendly marine life.

Evans was a traditionalist and was clad in swim trunks, a cloth swim cap and heavy glass-and-rubber goggles. He was also coated in ten pounds of what can only be called 'Farallones grease' – marine-bearing grease mixed with graphite, as a shark repellent, applied over a base layer of wintergreen oil. When Evans hit the water he was greeted not by the anticipated 20-foot great whites but rather a large number of giant, 25-foot jellyfish, according to the swim logs.

The scene was described as incredibly eerie, as the creatures drifted just below the swimmer, but with the thick grease coating still fully intact, stings were not an issue.

Evans swam alone until 3am, when the first escort swimmer joined him, and those who would join him on and off throughout the swim grabbed wetsuits and fins just to keep up.

Feedings were as critical in 1967 as they are today, albeit perhaps less sophisticated. Throughout the entire swim the Dolphin Club's

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Radioactive waste and great whites make the Farallone Islands one of the least inviting swims anywhere

Don Wardo never left his post on the pilot boat, feeding Evans his requested 7Up and lemon Jell-O for almost 14 hours.

Throughout the night and the early morning Evans maintained a front crawl at 55 strokes per minute, and only switched to sidestroke for feedings. Knowing that any extra time in that water could lead to failure, Evans never stopped moving forward.

According to the swim records, the first sign of any distress shown by Evans was severe shoulder pain at 6am, but the pain responded to aspirin and when another escort swimmer joined him at 8.30am the crew became increasingly confident that the mainland was just a matter of time.

While the intended landing site was to be Stinson Beach, a change in tides began driving the flotilla and swimmer north, while also slowing forward progress to roughly half a knot. Due to the rocky cliffs throughout that section of coast an advance boat had to scout out a gap between the treacherous rocks, and as the currents again changed closer to shore the crew found a small swim-able gap at Bolinas Point.

Escorted by two swimmers, positioned to watch for breaking waves and rocks, the Colonel touched bottom at 13h:44m:52s after leaving the Farallones. He crawled across the jagged rocks in the surf break before, in the words of the observer, Dr Fred Howard, "Stu felt so elated that he jogged up on the beach like a track man."

Just as Bannister did for others in breaking the four-minute mile, Evans showed us all what is possible. On 16 September, just three weeks after landing in Bolinas, Evans, the ultimate sportsman, helped escort Ted Erikson on his own Farallones journey that ended in a boat under the Golden Gate Bridge. Colonel Evans had succeeded at one of the most difficult swims in the world, yet the soft-spoken athlete never stopped coaching and encouraging others. Before his death from cancer in 1976, Evans spent countless hours in the water and on the pool deck, not only with his own kids but also others from the communities around Philadelphia, where he eventually settled with his wife, Pauline.

His legacy continues to lead hundreds into the ocean, for everything from a first dip to a race around an island under the watchful and expert eyes of his children.

While so many swimmers may celebrate conquering a section of water, Evans and his swims continue to encourage a celebration of being part of the water. For that gift of inspiration, Stu, we thank you. ●