



Alcatraz Challenge pushes 4 Malmstrom swimmers, runners to extremes

by Staff Sgt. Eydie Sakura
341st Missile Wing Public Affairs Office

7/30/2009 - **MALMSTROM AIR FORCE BASE, Mont.** -- The San Francisco Bay waters were unusually choppy the morning of July 12. The swimmers were gulping their fair share of salt water, straining and pushing their way to shore.

The rough waters between Alcatraz Island and the mainland is where the bay fills and drains into the Pacific Ocean. The current is always present, attempting to pull everything out to sea.

The one-and-a-half mile swim was the first leg of a two-part course known as the Alcatraz Challenge. The run was a seven mile run out-and-back along the beach and across the Golden Gate Bridge, to include a 250-foot climb between the two segments.

Four missile combat crew members from Malmstrom packed up their gear and headed west to San Francisco to put their bodies and minds to the test, and to see if they were up to the "challenge."

"I was extremely nervous before the start," said 1st Lt. Richard Young, 490th Missile Squadron. "The weather was stereotypical San Francisco--foggy and around 65 degrees. The water was unseasonably warm at 62 degrees, which is still cold."

1st Lt. Michaela Garcia, 490th MS, thought the most challenging portion of the race was standing around in the morning waiting to start.

"It was freezing," Lieutenant Garcia recalled. "It turns out wetsuits aren't that insulated outside the water. [It] was a shock to the system and the waves took a little getting used to."

Ferries took the 700 swimmers toward Alcatraz Island where they unloaded into the water in the space of eight minutes via two doors on either side of the ferry.

"On race day, the current was moving [approximately] two knots out to sea," said 1st Lt. Damon Bosetti, 10th Missile Squadron. "The swells were intense; over five feet at times, which made finding your landmarks difficult. At one point, I became disoriented enough to begin swimming back to Alcatraz. An escort boat quickly informed me of my error."

Lieutenant Bosetti said roughly three-fourths of the way through the swim, he mistakenly thought he was done, and that made it tough for him to keep focused on swimming the remainder of the course.

"At that point, I couldn't feel anything below my elbows and was getting sore from swimming over all the people [because of the poor visibility in the water]," Lieutenant Bosetti said. "My biggest thoughts during the swim were, 'Don't look at your watch' and 'I can't feel my arms.'"

After Lieutenant Bosetti climbed out of the bay, he said the run was just fine; however, Lieutenant Young had other thoughts.

"The terrain on the run was half on the beach and half on the bridge and it was an amazing run course," Lieutenant Young said. "A difficult hill connects the beach and the bridge. It is so steep you are really reduced to walking up it; that's a tip I got from a local who had done the race before. It was difficult getting up and the stairs were treacherous trying to run down."



(Left to right) 1st Lt. Michaela Garcia, 2nd Lt. James Schanep, 1st Lts. Richard Young and Damon Bosetti (ground), enjoy a rest and a smile after completing the Alcatraz Challenge in San Francisco July 12. The four missile combat crew members from the 10th and 490th Missile Squadrons at Malmstrom trained for six months to compete in the 1.5-mile swim and seven-mile run within the San Francisco Bay. (Courtesy photo)

The four Airmen from Malmstrom, including 2nd Lt. James Schannep, 10th MS, began training in the fall when they decided to attack the Alcatraz Challenge.

"Being in Montana during winter, there weren't any alternatives to the pool, so we trained for the open water environment by doing things like removing lane lines, swimming with our heads up, and drafting off of each other," Lieutenant Bosetti said. "The physical contact with the other racers was probably the most disconcerting thing we had to train for."

The four athletes also practiced running on the River's Edge Trail along the Missouri River once the weather warmed up. They eventually began working transitions between swimming and running, since the clock never stops, and completed some "dry runs" swimming a mile and quickly switching into running clothes to run for an hour.

"The whole experience was amazing," Lieutenant Garcia said. "I would recommend it to anyone who wants a real physical and mental challenge."

Lieutenant Young said his biggest help for sticking to his training throughout the winter was having three friends who would be there to go running and swimming with.

"There's nothing like setting a goal that terrifies you and confronting it with your friends," Lieutenant Bosetti said.