



Should I Swim For It?



by BEN RAYNOR

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So you find yourself alone in the water far from safety, when do you swim for it? The decision can be a matter of life or death in an emergency. There are a number of variables:

- Are you injured?
- When did you last eat? (You'll need those calories)
- How cold is the water? Your movements may be of benefit, but it will cost you energy, energy that you need to survive.

Today's thinking is to swim only short distances for very specific reasons; to get to something good (safety) or to get away from something bad (Fire/fuel, debris).

The benefits at that all survivors are together, and the sharing of body heat. Like any movement, however, this formation will still be an energy drain.

I instruct all my students to go with the flow. Humans are not efficient in the water. Even a strong swimmer can only mangle one mile per hour or so. Just a half-knot current will rapidly exhaust you. If forces are pushing you, even if it is away from land or safety, go along for the ride.

Case histories can be found of people making epic swims, but they are truly the exception rather than the rule.

For every case of a victim attempting and making a long swim, there are dozens in which people have perished when attempting to make it by swimming.

DON'T SWIM FOR SWIMMING SAKE

If possible, adopt the HELP position or Carpet Formation, or simply float on your back. (See RISAA Nov. 2017, issue 227)

Your survival instinct may be telling you to do something, but in many cases staying put is the best alternative. Also, rescuers will be looking for you close to the sinking or overboard location. The farther you swim from that locale, the harder it will be for rescuers to find you.

If you are with other survivors, always swim as a group toward the target. In case histories where one individual was tasked with trying to swim for help or a life raft, they either perish or are the only survivor.

Swim only short distances... to get to something good (safety) or get away from the bad (fire, fuel, debris)

WHEN TO SWIM ON YOUR BACK

Also, swim on your back if you have a flotation device. Natural swimming styles with a donned vest will be very difficult to manage and burn far more energy. Simply lay on your back, utilize slow lazy back strokes, and conserve those calories.

THE CHAIN FORMATION

The best technique is the "Chain Formation." With all survivors facing the same direction hook your legs around the person in front of you, and your feet should go underneath the person who is two in front of you. The person at the head of the chain is the captain and should shout out a cadence with as few syllables as possible, such as, "arms up-stroke" or simply "arms-stroke".

This formation works most effectively when it is done in unison. The person at the end of the chain should not stroke, but keep the chain together and lightly flutter kick so as to lessen the drag.



The Chain Formation is the most efficient method to move as a group.

Ben Rayner is a former underwater-egress and sea-survival instructor. He is also an award-winning investigative journalist as senior staff writer at Shore Publishing in Madison, Connecticut. His articles and features have seen print in a wide variety of publications, including *Sailing* magazine, *Air Beat* magazine, *Atlantic Coast Fisheries News*, and the *Block Island Times*.

Rayner is executive director of Water Emergency Training, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to saving lives through drowning-prevention education and training.

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