

### **Combat Water Survival, Third Class (CWS3)**

*“Enter water from height of 5 feet using the modified abandon ship technique, into deep water with full gear and weapon, travel 10 meters, remove pack, and travel 15 meters with pack and weapon.”*

I was entering the water from a little higher than 5 feet. I was not abandoning a ship either. Instead, I was abandoning the Bridge of The 14th of July above the Tigris River. I handed the PRC-119 radio to another Marine. I jumped with full knowledge that the swim ahead was further than what I had been required to swim back in San Diego. What I couldn't have prepared for was the stark contrast with the heated pool back at home. The pain almost rendered me unconscious. The rescue swim was almost over before it began.

I swam back to the surface of this polar bear plunge in the middle of the desert. The temperature tricked my body into forgetting the need to breathe. In my state of crisis, as my body yearned for air, as my oxygen levels dropped, I pictured my mother and remembered her stories of these rivers...

“Biblical lands!” she had exclaimed.

“I'll make sure and send a postcard, Madre,” I snorted at her while I packed my gear.

In Genesis these rivers are from the mythological Garden of Eden. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the third and fourth rivers respectively. In its current state, it much more resembled the rivers as depicted in Revelations. The end of times was near. Here I was on the banks of the river like Daniel having visions.

I gasped and finally caught my breath; I was back in the river. I kicked and pulled frantically through the water. The fire illuminated the overturned vehicle, and I could see

the back wheels of the seven ton still rolling on. As I made my way down to where the truck had come to a stop, I began to bump into gear. First a pack, and then food we had been rationing. My stomach, already a mess, lurched as I struggled to focus over the sound of my teeth chattering. The screams of a Marine nearby snapped some clarity back into my life.

“Castro!!” He got out before going under. He popped up again and again as he labored. “My leg is fucked,” he cried out.

### **Combat Water Survival, Second Class (CWS2)**

*“Wearing full combat gear, perform 25-meter collar-tow on passive “victim” similarly dressed, simultaneously towing two packs and two weapons.”*

I grabbed the back of his flak jacket and pulled as I side-stroked using the current to help me carry his ass back to shore. Once he was on land the pain really set in, and he was not doing much yelling. The corpsman was already applying the tourniquet to his left leg. The morphine that followed sent Mercado off with the sandman. The other swimmers were not as lucky as I had been. I could hear them counting out compressions as they wrestled with the unconscious bodies. I knew Mercado had been with first platoon, so my worst fears were confirmed; Valencia must have gone in the water when the truck hit that IED. This fighting force had proven to be as problematic as our unorthodox fighting had once been for the British.

Jumping back in the water was not necessary if you had already made it back to shore with at least one Marine. Most of the other swimmers were now securing the perimeter. After all, it wasn't just the strong current and fire that threatened us. Surely, whoever set that IED would be coming to take pleasure in seeing their work. There would be no better time for their target practice. Thank God they're not all marksmen like the men in our ranks.

I still could not find Valencia and he was one of those rare marines that could hardly swim. He'd barely qualified with an unofficial combat water survival 4. He was certain we would not be doing much swimming in the desert,

never mind the classroom training before our deployment and the literal meaning of "Mesopotamia". The cradle of civilization was located between these two rivers. The flooding that once gave life had also made it the reason for so much death.

### **Combat Water Survival, First Class (CWS1)**

*"Tread water or survival float in deep water with utilities and boots for 30 minutes without artificial floatation. Boots will be removed after 5 min. and retained. Five min. prior to completion of the 30 min float, and without exiting from the water, replace the boots and swim 500 meters using one or a combination of survival strokes."*

I kept telling myself that I owed him one more lap. Not much of a swimmer but the gold standard when it came to troop morale and the esprit de corps that fueled the brotherhood. I walked upriver on the shore before getting back in the water. I moved packs and called out to him. I swam as close to the truck as I could. That is when Captain O'Brian called out that just two Marines were unaccounted for. I knew one of them had to be Valencia.

The marine I handed the radio to had made his way down to the river. He called for me to come back in. He had heard the call go out, with the company engaged to the north, we needed to call the quick reaction force. I dove below the surface one more time. Visibility was close to zero, but I felt my way around. That is when I realized the front of the truck had taken a direct hit and no one in the cabin could have survived. If the blast did not kill them, they died fighting for their last breath.

I swam back to the surface. I could sense the emotions taking over. I could also hear the machine guns now fully engaged. The full rate of fire told the story of the size of the force coming. The sky was now bright with tracers. I could tell by the bright crimson streaks that they were ours. The green tracers the Iraqis use were outnumbered. By sheer number, we were winning that exchange. I decided to keep swimming, in hopes of getting him out regardless of his status. Killed in Action provides a closure that Missing in Action just can't.

Soon after, my own head started spinning. I knew I had been at this for too long and if I did not get out now, I, too, would lose my life so far away from home. I kicked and kicked and although I questioned if I'd lost consciousness, I was now on the shore. I cried for my best friend. I cried for his family. I cried for my family.

### **Marine Corps Instructor of Water Survival (MCIWS)**

*“Among the most physically demanding courses in the Corps. This course creates instructors who can train Marines to react and survive life-threatening situations in the water. The course mixes heavy loads of aquatic conditioning, endurance swims, rescues, and training for aquatic emergencies. Half of you will fail!”*

After coming home, and with every intention of leaving the Marine Corps, I decided to become a Combat Water Survival Instructor. Before my deployment, I completed the subjectively tougher Water Survival Advanced, a qualification with attrition rates between 75-85%. I would now honor his memory by drown-proofing other Marines under my charge. Not only did I lose Valencia that night to the blast, but several Marines drowned because of lack of training in the name of expediting the show of force overseas.

It was 5 years before I could visit his family. It was his daughter's fifteenth birthday, her quinceñera, and I could not say no to his mom when she requested I be there to tell his daughter a little about her father and the time we shared together before his tragic death. I spoke to her about how much he had told me about her every night before we fell asleep at bootcamp. She, in turn, told me how she still remembers me visiting. As she shared memory after memory, she began to reminisce about much fun she would have swimming with her dad. I thought this odd because of how poorly he had done when we went through training. It turns out, like everything else in his life Valencia ever struggled with, he had made it a point to work harder than anyone else around him and eventually master it.

He knew about the possibility of the MCIWS course having an opening. He had, in fact, completed the screening for the course that once terrified him. It was actually his spot that I filled when I got back home from Iraq.

Every pilot I had trained. Every sailor I prepared for their time at BUD/S. Every person I dragged out of the pool because of a shallow water blackout. They were all indebted to him. I am now convinced he pulled me out from under that overturned truck in Iraq.