My aspiration to do the Ederle Swim began in fall 2007, when I was a boat observer for the race. Experienced marathon swimmers advised that I try an easier swim first, which led me to MIMS in 2008. For that one, I rallied a great group of people who dubbed themselves "Team Hannah Banana," taking care of everything from food to coordination along the spectator-friendly route. It was a tremendous experience that filled me with gratitude for weeks.

My approach to the Ederle Swim was more low-key. I figured that it would be a more internal challenge, since the race is not as well known and the course not as well suited to spectators. As it turned out, though, I needed and received an incredible amount of support for this undertaking too.

The water temperature started dropping in September. Every weekend out at the beach, we'd wish that the Ederle Swim was taking place right then rather than having to swim in even colder water. The week of the schedule swim was especially cold and miserable, with the forecast promising snow outside the city and heavy rains and winds during the weekend. Thus, on the Wednesday before the swim date, things were postponed until the following Tuesday, which looked to be warmer. It was a sensible decision, but unfortunately it meant the loss of two swimmers, one of whom I'd swum with a lot in training and was looking forward to sharing the swim experience with. It also threw me into a funk, as I prefer to make a plan and stick with it. The date change meant I'd have a different boat, a slower tide, a new start location, and water that had three more days to cool down. Additionally, my crew member Janet had a family emergency that weekend and would not be available for the new date. With the water now about 5 degrees colder than I'd been counting on, and a slower swim predicted without such a strong tide, I felt like the swim would be impossible for me to complete and questioned the wisdom of even starting.

I ruminated all weekend and Monday too, as I'd taken the day off work. Some friends in the swim community helped me to remember what I'd been looking forward to, and how much I love new swim experiences. I was also able to line up a ringer of a replacement crew member in Lance, the only person to complete the Ederle Swim twice. With so much encouragement, and the knowledge that my preparations were as good as they could be, I decided to go ahead.

The Tuesday of the swim was a bright sunny day, in stark contrast to the several days of cold, dismal weather we'd had immediately prior. As my cab traveled to the start, the East River sparkled and Governors Island looked as enticingly swimmable as always. A nice crowd was gathered at North Cove, including swimmers, volunteers, crew members, and even a few spectators. Mom and a swim team-mate squished next to me on the bench to serve as my personal warming station before the boats took off. Another swimmer who was also worried about the cold kindly let me take a few scoops
of "Channel Grease" to apply for warmth.

Once on the boat with my crew, I popped in my ear plugs and glopped a bit of grease onto my forearms and ankles, hoping to keep my hands and feet from becoming painfully cold. Off the Battery, we awaited the call to start, and I was happily oblivious of the chatter thanks to the ear plugs. When the moment came to hop in, I eased myself down the ladder of our tiny boat and began telling myself how warm the water was even as it took my breath away. We assembled alongside the sea wall, giving me just enough time to catch my breath and enjoy the view of Manhattan and Governors Island from the water. Most of the people on shore were lined up for the Statue of Liberty ferries, not paying any attention to the crazy people in the water, but my good friend Trudy (same nickname as Gertrude Ederle) and some of her Weekday Cyclist buddies were cheering for us like mad.

And then we started! We had to stay in a bit of a pod to cross the Staten Island Ferry pathway, and it was slow going through the chop with minimal tidal assistance. We gradually spread out and swam down the east side of Governors Island, a place I'd swum a number of times but never in that direction.

It truly was a glorious day. The water was an amazing emerald shade, and as my hands cut through the bubbles sparkled like diamonds. The sun felt warm on my back, and the air was very clear. I had Ilene on one side of me in her kayak and my tiny little boat and crew on the other side, and I concentrated on relaxing and taking in the warmth. When we stopped for a quick feeding, Ilene let me know that I was in second place behind another woman. My feeding included warm Accelerade, which definitely helped me maintain some warmth.

Governors Island seemed to take a while to pass. For some time I couldn't get away from one building, but then I remembered that the island is known for this particularly large military building, so maybe I was making progress after all. At the southern tip of the island, the Statue of Liberty comes into view. During the NYC Pro Swim weekend this past summer, I'd gone on a special island tour with the visiting swimmers, and a Parks employee told us how the Statue always looks different, that she has as many moods as the water and sky. On this day, she seemed to be waving us on.

Heading south alongside Brooklyn, I knew the Weekday Cyclists were nearby but felt like even a quick stop to wave would result in too much heat loss, so I just kept swimming. Somewhere near Bay Ridge, I caught up to the lead swimmer. I was happy to see that it was Nancy, who'd given me the grease. We swam side-by-side for a few minutes, with me sandwiched between her and Michelle, her cheery paddler on a sit-on-top kayak that made her super-easy to see. I worried that Nancy might have not wanted me to be so close, or that I was violating a drafting rule, but no one was yelling at us so I tried to enjoy the company and imagine that we were sharing body heat, as she'd joked earlier. Our tandem effort ended when she stopped for a feeding and I chose to stay on my own schedule. I've swum with her a few times, including a 5-hour training swim in September, and knew that she has incredible speed and endurance so figured I'd be seeing her again. I optimistically envisioned us hitting the beach together.
Some other memories from this time: a strange clicking sound underwater. Figuring it was some kind of industrial work (later confirmed to be drilling that they could see but not hear from the boat), I nonetheless pretended it was whales speaking via clicks as they do. Looking for the manatee who had the unfortunate luck to be trapped in the harbor as the temperature dropped, unable to handle cold below the mid-60s despite its girth. Being able to see the Weekday Cyclists as I stopped at a feeding when they were in view near the bridge. Thinking of my missing crew person’s ailing brother, as well as the brother of my replacement crew, a firefighter who died on 9/11. These thoughts motivated me to put more effort in.

Swimming under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge had always been the most compelling aspect of the swim for me. Having worked for two organizations whose main events owe their very existence to that bridge, and having run and biked over it as part of those events for years, the chance to swim under it seemed especially thrilling. As it drew near, I just couldn’t believe it was happening. Say what you will about its lack of a bike path, or the neighborhoods it destroyed, or the traffic it causes, it is a beautiful bridge and a stunning gateway to the harbor. Our course called for us to stay toward the left stanchion but under the main span, and due to fears of being blown into Gravesend Bay we tried to edge well into the channel at this point. The shadow of the bridge hit before I was under it, since the sun was low in the sky. This meant that I could enjoy the crossing in full sunshine. I turned over to swim backstroke and gaze up at the bridge. It seemed really wide, allowing me to savor the experience of being under it for a nice long while.

By now the tidal assist was significant, so I plowed ahead into the Lower Bay. Ambrose Channel and the four-hour mark lay ahead as my next goals. I had the mental boost of the lead boat in front of me, with its giant orange buoy guiding the way, but then an ominous-looking gray boat came up on my right. Turns out the Coast Guard wanted to escort the lead swimmer through this part of the harbor, now that I'd exited NYPD's territory. They hung there right next to me, opposite my escort boat, and seemed to be leering as they blocked my view.

The chop soon distracted me from worrying about the boat. It hit not long after we passed the bridge, as the harbor opened up. The waves were big and irregular, making it hard to keep a rhythm and at one point sending me very nearly into Ilene's kayak. I slowed down my stroke and switched to an almost catch-up mode to try to work my way through, taking in a mouthful of water every now and then.

And then I really zoned out. A good chunk of time passed without me even knowing it. All of a sudden I "woke up" a bit dizzy from a dream that I was in the Hudson off Washington Heights swimming around Manhattan with the reverse-course record-holder, whose inspirational swim I'd witnessed a month earlier. In my thoughts, she and I were trading reminders to "just keep swimming" and about how much we loved the water--a very nice experience. Alas, I was nowhere near Washington Heights and when I realized this I started to get nervous about the cold playing tricks on me. I tried to communicate this hallucination to my crew, but they just told me I was getting close and to keep swimming. I wrote off some of my dizziness after realizing I was missing an ear plug--which may have been gone for a long while for all I knew--and it subsided a bit when I got a replacement.
The chop died down, just as it had done at the swim I watched two years ago, and Ilene pointed out a buoy for me to aim for. Only afterward did they tell me that I'd crossed Ambrose Channel! I'd been hoping to see giant tankers and container ships, figuring they would give me a boost of adrenaline, but there was no traffic in sight during my crossing.

At this point, I was seriously confused about timing. Having missed a period of time due to the sleep-like state, I didn't remember a few feedings, so I actually thought my time in the water was much less than it really was. My crew pointed out land ahead, which I could see if I lifted my head, and I remember asking in utter disbelief, "Is that the sand?!" of Sandy Hook?

It was indeed, but without seeing anything to the side, I had no sense of whether I was making progress. I'd ridden the Highlands ferry to scope out the course in September, and from up in the boat there's plenty of land visible to both sides. From the water-level perspective, though, you can't see it, something I hadn't anticipated. What I could see were some Erector-set-style towers that I thought were on land. Unfortunately, they turned out to be in the water along with many buoys and other structures that seemed specifically placed to confuse me. Looking at pictures later, I decided that the Beverly Hillbillies had dropped all their radio equipment out in the water there.

Meanwhile, the sand didn't seem to be getting any closer. My crew decided to feed me more often to try to keep me energized and give me that extra warmth, but my tongue was stinging and I felt intermittently dizzy and nauseous, so my attempts to eat and drink weren't very successful. Instead, I kept stopping to try to defog my goggles, even though it was the glare of the sun that was causing me not to see well.

When Trudy Ederle swam the English Channel in terribly stormy conditions, she was told to stop when her chance of getting across seemed hopeless. "What for?" she asked as she kept swimming. I wish I had had the same spirit, but the more my crew told me to "just keep swimming," the more I wondered what for. Thinking I'd been in the water a shorter amount of time than I really had, not realizing how close the land was, and scared about the hallucination experience, it seemed foolhardy to continue. My crew would occasionally ask me simple questions to check my brain function, and I was fine with all of them. (Well, except for the question of what day it was, which was legitimately confusing given that the swim date had changed and I hadn't been at work in four days.) Further, I still had motor control of my hands, which is usually something you lose early on well before full-on hypothermia sets in. So I knew that by some measures I was OK, but still something or other caused me to stop. The water temperature at that point had dropped to 54, having been above 55 most of the time, so maybe that's what did it. All I know is that I really didn't care about finishing.

So I signaled that I wanted to stop and that was that, the elapsed time being about 5:50. They helped me into the boat and immediately started Operation Warm Hannah Up. I stripped off my suit and climbed into my sleeping bag, with Lisa and Lance piling on top of me along with blankets, jackets, and hats while I shakily drank my specially reserved Thermos of cocoa. My legs seized up something fierce with the blood going to my core instead. At the post-swim dinner I had to lift my legs with
my arms to cross or uncross them, and they were sore for days, while my arms barely
even registered the effort of the swim. (There's definitely something to that whole
ice-bath concept!) My boat captain took the return trip nice and slow, and by the
time we reached North Cove the sun had set but I was warm.

Thus began the process of learning all the things I didn't know. Turns out I had
been so close that some people following the GPS feed online left me messages of
congratulations, assuming I had not only finished but won. My sudden stop meant that
a thoughtful but secret-from-me plan to have me return on board the spacious lead
boat had to be aborted and left my crew scrambling to get my gear back on board and
organized for the trip back on our tiny boat. My time in the water was nearly six
hours, far longer than I thought I'd been out there. They were negotiating mixed
messages from race officials the whole time, as everyone tried to find the best
currents without straying too far into the path of traffic. Nancy had been miserable
from the start and finally stopped due to cold after passing the bridge. Another
swimmer had also stopped due to cold, and another with an injury, but three went on
to finish!

In retrospect, I was never very excited about Sandy Hook as a destination. The
bridge had been my primary focus, and try as I would to visualize the swim in
advance, I could never make it all connect. The feeling of sand under my feet after
a long swim, sure, that's something I know well, but my brain couldn't wrap itself
around the full path to the sand. Now I know why--there's nothing to see for a good
chunk of the swim! My main love is seeing familiar landmarks from the new
perspective of the water. I had also always figured on this swim lasting
considerably under 6 hours, as the original tide should have allowed that, so it's
interesting that I timed out at that point even though I had no concept of time. The
body really does what the mind lets it do, no more or no less.

Until this swim, I'd never withdrawn from an event or failed to finish. The thought
of a "did not finish" in my record worried me in advance, but now that it's there I
don't mind. Finishing is just a small part of a very long process, and in my case
the experience was not diminished by its absence. I am glad to have the GPS track on
record both as proof of how far I managed to go and to try to fill in the gaps of my
memory.

Aside from my legs, the main discomfort I felt after the swim was a sore throat and
sensitive tongue. The former went away overnight, and the latter lasted a few
days--until the sides of my tongue PEELED OFF. Ew. The water out there was saltier
than what I'd swum in before. I also had yet another case of my friends the sea
lice, with blisters upon itchy blisters on my abdomen for a week. When I went for an
easy pool swim two days later, the dizziness and nausea I'd felt in the water
returned for about 48 hours. This had me really worried that I'd developed some type
of seasickness set off by swimming, but I took several days off and all returned to
normal.

Both air and water temperatures warmed up again later in the month. We had
freakishly cold conditions for that time, but honestly I wouldn't change anything
about the experience. I didn't expect to be able to push myself so hard under those
circumstances, or to be so happy with a DNF. It was also good for me to mentally
work through so many last-minute changes and force a positive mindset. At the Team Hannah Banana spa day this past weekend, the "very cold" plunge pool put things into perspective. People shrieked as they touched it, and even I couldn't get in. The temperature? A balmy 57.

Just as after MIMS, my overarching memory from the event is a sense of gratitude. Thoughts of how lucky I am to have clean water, world-class events, an amazing cityscape, supportive friends and family, and such a strong love of swimming carried me through the water that day and many days after.