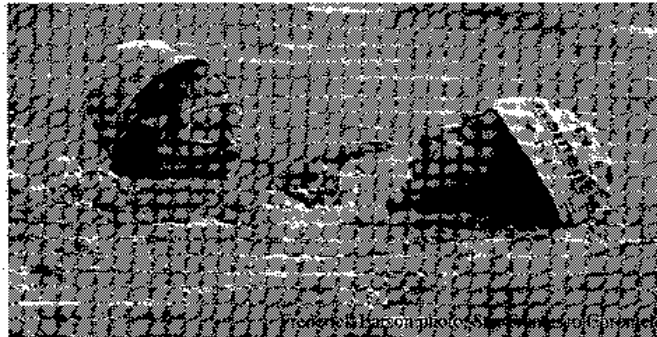


From the Badlands to Alcatraz

by Richard Iron Cloud

"Alcatraz looks like a turtle," said the young Oglala Amando Black Bear from the Sue Ann Big Crow Boys and Girls Club in Pine Ridge SD. Our boat moved slowly, bouncing up and down with the waves, moving toward Alcatraz Island for our planned mile and one-half swim to shore. As we gazed out into the foggy, rough, murky waters, of San Francisco Bay, if we had any second thoughts we didn't voice them.

We had been practicing all week, slowly acclimatizing ourselves by staying in the cold waters until we could stay in for a whole hour. Our trainer Fred Crisp said it was good that I had some extra fat because it would work as an insulator in the cold water. I facetiously told him that was the reason I was overweight I had been preparing for this particular feat. Finally, the day had come all too quickly to show our bravery and



Iron Cloud, on right, swimming the channel from Alcatraz in chilly 60° water

Francisco Police man, was with Amando and Dr. Iverson was with me. A small boat floated beside each of us.

Los Angeles Times reporter John Gionna, riding in the boat beside me, would write this description of our swim:

"The 47 year old Iron Cloud, a gentle man with flowing black hair, has already surpassed the reservation average life expectancy of 45. But to change the prevailing lifestyles at Pine Ridge, he knows he must first conquer something else, his own fear of deep water. Its those churning rough

vation lifestyle can be no less dangerous. He recently lost a 47 year old cousin to diabetes, in the end watching him waste away on a kidney dialysis machine.

"As the weak September sun rises, the swimmers zigzag across the harbor, at first pulled west by the early tide and later pushed back east by the inward swell of water. The fishing boat and three smaller craft help the men negotiate a steady stream of barges, cruise ships, yachts and lumber container ships. Struggling for direction, fighting off leg cramps, Iron Cloud still does not ignore the beauty he encounters here. He watches as a

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Training

Thursday, January 22,
2004 from 9:30 am to 3:30
pm At Dejuza Haka
College Center in Kyle, SD

Presenter: Darla Korol,
M.S.W., OLC Human
Services Instructor

Sponsored by Oglala Lakota
College Community/
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more information.

That War Over There

son I was overweight I had been preparing for this particular feat. Finally, the day had come all too quickly to show our bravery and fortitude, two virtues appreciated by our Lakota ancestors.

According to our host, Dr. Robert Verhoogen, we were going to embark on a feat that had never been done before. He had never heard of any one swimming Alcatraz after only one week of training.

I sat in the front of the boat as we moved slowly toward Alcatraz Island and talked with the Los Angeles Times photographer who sat beside me. I told him the child inside myself would look at this as an exciting adventure, at the same time the adult in myself was telling me to be careful, watch out it may be dangerous. So I tried to keep the child at the forefront by sitting in front of the boat because that is where a child would sit. We were getting prepared to make our offerings to the water spirits and our prayers to Wakan Tanka to give us strength and courage to take on this enormous challenge.

Every step of the way we had a team of dedicated people devoted to helping us achieve our goal. Safety was a number one issue and concern. We had two trainers in the water with us, Fred Crisp, a San

average life expectancy of 45. But to change the prevailing lifestyles at Pine Ridge, he knows he must first conquer something else, his own fear of deep water. 'Its those churning rough swells, the black water,' he said before the swim. 'It's murky and unknown. Anything could be down there.'

"At 9am he and 22 year old Black Bear invoke several Native American prayers in a musical chant. Then like escaping convicts straight from the folklore of this old prison fortress, they take the plunge into the bays 60 degree waters and begin the long pull towards the distant shore. Iron Cloud instantly feels his head pound from the chill, and then he does something instinctive - he begins to swim. Aided by his flippers, stroke, breath, stroke every time Iron cloud finds a rhythm. A foot high wave breaks across his head, slapping his face the salt water stinging his eyes.

"Back home his friends and family had told Iron Cloud he was crazy to go swimming in deep water. As he swallows more water, he now wonders if they were right. Without a wetsuit and with only a few days training, Iron Cloud has swum only in creeks and streams for not more than an hour at a time. He knows that to finish this swim he will need one of the Lakota's four virtues - bravery. He has heard the stories of rolling bay water that bedeviled Alcatraz convicts for decades he knows how the currents and fog can silently sweep in and confuse a swimmer.

"But Iron Cloud knows the reser-

verages, cruise ships, yachts and lumber container ships. Struggling for direction, fighting off leg cramps, Iron Cloud still does not ignore the beauty he encounters here. He watches as a curious seal surfaces few feet away, followed by a persistent cormorant that swims past on the surface. Half-way across the bay Black Bear struggles near exhaustion his arms move sluggishly through the water as he thinks of the grandmother who died recently on the reservation.

"Soon the sun reappears from the clouds and spreads a sheet of light across the water. Although his legs continue to hurt, Iron Cloud feels more at peace. At moments he feels almost as though he's is taking a long loping run across the vast, expanse of his Great Plains home. At 10:30 am 90 minutes after they began Iron Cloud and Black Bear drag themselves onto the sandy shore near Ghirardelli Square."

As I was coming in to the aquatic park, with legs cramping, people cheered me on. One of them yelled, "We are friends of Manuel," my cousin who had passed away one month earlier from diabetes. I was literally in pain so I was unable to converse with them. I know that my cousin Manuel Iron Cloud was there with me that day. We went into the sauna, put it on full steam, and sang our Wopila songs (thank you songs).

That War Over There

And so we wait
restless
try not to think too much
about what we just did

Some grieve the means
Some gloat the end

Justify it as liberation, dear...
Now they are free
to die in the dark-
thirsty, dusty

The why was a lie
when that doesn't work
try another

As the reality of war
drifts off like a thunderhead
our gaze shifts

A blank stare, blink, numb
on to the next one
back to the busy
uneasy of the day.