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### GWU Alumna Heather Roka Completes English Channel Swim

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# GWU Alumna Heather Roka Completes English Channel Swim


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Office of University  
Communications

August 25, 2017

*Roka '08 Made the Crossing Aug. 24-25 in just over 12 hours*

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—With each stroke through the 64-degree waters of the English Channel, Heather Roka, a 2008 Gardner-Webb University alumna, thought about all the people in her life who inspire her. Roka started her solo swim Aug. 24 and finished Aug. 25 in 12 hours, 13 minutes and 53 seconds, making her the fifth fastest swimmer of 29 successful crossings this year. The 31-year-old first talked about crossing the channel when she was a member of the GWU swim team. She has trained since 2012 to tackle a feat accomplished by 1,619 people, according to the Channel Swimming and Piloting Federation.



Heather Roka in Fort Myers, Fla. Photo courtesy of Andrew West,  
<http://newspr.es/2g7HaZH>

About 300 meters off the French coast, a changed tide with a strong rip current came between Roka and her dream. “The last 90 minutes of the swim nearly broke me mentally,” she confessed. “When I finally pulled myself up the rocks, it was mainly just an overwhelming sense of relief and a little disbelief that I was standing on France. It took about 24 hours for it to sink in that it had actually happened and now I smile every time I think about it. Thankfully, I had trained enough that I was physically able to keep going and I can’t wait for the next challenge.”

In the months leading up to the swim, Roka felt blessed because of everything that happened to make the attempt possible. She has an ideal job as a travel physical therapist and randomly met two channel experts, one lives 10 miles from her, Marcy MacDonald, who has completed the channel swim a record 15 times. “MacDonald helped with my training, has provided unending support, and then helped guide and reassure me while I was in England,” Roka reflected. “I have been so overwhelmed and blessed by the huge amount of support from so many of my GWU classmates and friends.”



Heather Roka won the Tampa Bay Marathon Swim in April 2017. This photo was made around the 22-mile mark.

Gardner-Webb Swim Coach Mike Simpson is not surprised that Roka has reached her goal to swim the channel. “Heather has always been a tough cookie,” he observed. “She is tough physically. She is tougher mentally. Heather has always had an incredible work ethic.”

Simpson has built a winning program with student-athletes who are also honored for their academic excellence. “We decided from the beginning to find great fits for Gardner-Webb,” Simpson assessed. “Athletes who get this place. Value the education. Desire to get better athletically, but most importantly, have character and integrity. Heather definitely had all three. She fell in love with this place, and we knew she was a fantastic fit for Gardner-Webb.”

For the English Channel swim, Roka’s toughest challenges were the cold water and swimming about five hours in the dark. Her crew—sister Lyndsey, friend Isabel (both GWU swimmers) and Isabel’s husband, Dean—gave her warm soup and drinks. To maintain her mental focus, she thought about her patients: teens with spinal cord injuries, adults recovering from strokes, and a 70-year-old amputee. “All of these people have undergone a traumatic situation that has forever changed their life, and yet it is inspiring how many embrace all the challenges I can throw at them,” Roka described. “They work so hard, pushing past sweat, tears, frustration and pain. Without saying anything, these people encourage me to do more and try harder things because no matter what challenge I take on, they are working even harder.”

Roka said swimming at GWU taught her the basics, like pacing and focusing on techniques, but also instilled something more. “The team taught me how to learn to love a challenge, and the wonderful lifetime friendships formed during hours of training, bus rides, and meets still impact my life on a daily basis,” she affirmed. “The only reason I am even attempting this swim is because of the love of swimming and all the positive memories. Upon graduation, I found myself unable to walk away from the swimming world. No words will ever describe how grateful I am that Coach Simpson decided I could be a valuable part of the GWU team and family.”

See Roka’s progress at <http://bit.ly/2xw6iMY>

*Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university that prepares students to become critical thinkers, effective leaders and compassionate servants in the global community. Emphasizing a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics, Gardner-Webb ignites learning and service opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.*