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I went from bedridden to marathon swimmer

When crippling ME meant **BETH FRENCH** couldn't get out of bed, she dreamt of crossing the English Channel. Here she shares her extraordinary story

AS she watched a shark glide towards her, Beth French wondered if she was about to become its dinner.

The 41-year-old mum-of-one was part way through a 26-mile channel swim from Molokai to Oahu in Hawaii. A treacherous stretch of water, it's known as the "channel of bones". And Beth was beginning to see why.

"When I lifted my head to take my hourly drink, the guy in the safety kayak said: 'Don't panic, but there's a shark behind you'.

"I could see its fin. It sank down and came towards me. It circled around, then rested its nose on the kayak."

Thankfully, the support boat arrived and the shark swam off.

"Afterwards it was pretty horrendous trying to get my head back into the water in the pitch black," says Beth.

Amazingly, she completed the swim in 18 hours.

And afterwards, she felt invincible.

"I thought if I can come face-to-face with a shark, I can deal with anything."

For Beth the challenge meant everything.

At 10, she started suffering bouts of unexplained pain which left her bedridden for days on end. A series of tests were inconclusive.

"I was an active child, so to be collapsed in a heap one day and fine the next was very confusing," says Beth.

Beth finished secondary school and went to college. But the pressure to do well made her condition worse.

"One day when I was 17, I woke up and I couldn't even sit upright or brush my own hair or teeth.

"It felt like there was lava being poured into my body. I constantly felt a hot, dull ache and trying to

move caused a sharp, searing, pain." Eventually she was diagnosed with myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) – a chronic neurological condition.

"The doctor told me there was no cure and that I might never recover. I was devastated."

On the days she was bedridden, Beth made a bucket list of things she wanted to do in life. One was to swim the English Channel.

"I needed a reason to get out of bed," she says.

It took two years for Beth to fully recover, but finally she was able to live a normal life.

At 30, she fell pregnant and in 2010, her son Dylan was born.

But two years later in 2012, Beth and her partner of seven years split up.

Now a single parent, Beth was scared of getting sick again.

"I was self-employed and becoming a single mum."

So she decided to take on a challenge to prove to herself how capable she really was.

"I thought to myself: 'I've got to do something bigger and scarier than my daily life.'"

"I reached for my bucket list and decided to swim to France."

Over two years, Beth trained. And in July 2012, she swam the 21 miles across the Channel.

"I expected it to be hell, but I loved it because my body and my mind were working together. It was such a joy and a relief to know I could do it."

The elation spurred Beth on to try another swim, and she completed Molokai to Oahu in Hawaii in 24hrs 10 minutes that December.

Swimming gave her a sense of freedom. "I'd felt trapped in my

own body before, but I didn't feel trapped when I was swimming. I felt free." Two years later, she swam from Cornwall to the Isles of Scilly, a feat that had never been done before.

Then she turned her attention to her greatest challenge yet – swimming the seven channels of the world in one year.

"It would be a world record attempt. I wanted to push myself to the limit – and I hadn't found my limit yet."

Meanwhile, Dylan had been diagnosed as autistic and was being home-schooled. Beth began fundraising, and prepared to take Dylan with her to the seven swims.

SOME people thought it was irresponsible. But Beth disagreed. "Men can go and climb a mountain and it's never questioned whether they have kids or not. But if you're a woman people ask whether you should do it," she says.

But for every negative reaction to her challenge, there were more positive ones.

"People said I was setting an amazing example for my son."

In October 2016, she set off for the US to swim from Catalina Island to Los Angeles.

"I had pilot whales in front of me and dolphins swimming behind,

which was incredible." Beth completed the swim in 19 hours. Two months later, she swam from Molokai to Oahu again. "There were tiny phytoplankton in the water that make light when they get disturbed."

"So there were little twists of green light spiralling off my fingertips as my hands moved through the water. It was mesmerising," she says.

It was there, 10 hours into the swim, that she came face to face with the shark.

In February 2017, Beth swam the Cook Strait in New Zealand in nine hours 11mins, and in May she swam the Strait of Gibraltar in under five hours.

But while Beth's swims were a success, Dylan was getting increasingly homesick. She also worried she would trigger her ME.

In July 2017,

HAPPY: Beth, right, is proud of what she's achieved and, below, with her son Dylan

she attempted to swim across the Tsugaru Channel in Japan, but stopped part-way through. "I'd swum four channels in a year, and suddenly felt I had nothing left to prove."

Now Beth is focusing on spending time with her son, who is 10.

"One thing autistic people struggle with is the unknown, so I was really happy that when we left Japan Dylan asked what our next adventure would be," she says.

And while she still sometimes struggles with ME, Beth is so proud of what she has achieved.

"I now trust my body in a way I never did before," she says.

"I believe in myself."

● *Against the Tides* is in cinemas May 10. Visit ourscreen.com/against-the-tides

Interview by ELIZABETH ARCHER



CHALLENGE: Beth on her channel swim