

Why I Didn't Learn to Swim Until I Joined

By Bob Van Elsberg
Managing Editor
Road & Rec, USAF

When I was a kid, my cat and I had one thing in common—a hatred of water. I didn't want to sit in it, stand in a shower under it, and most of all, I didn't want to get in water above my head. However, it was summer, and my dad told me that I **was** taking swimming lessons. Since he was twice my size and could flick a fly off the wall with his belt, I didn't have much choice.

The appointed, and much dreaded, day came, and I found myself at the local pool with a lot of other youngsters, also slated to take the swimming course. The instructor looked very reassuring as he told us that this really would be a lot of fun, and there wouldn't be any danger.

"Yeah," I thought. "If I was supposed to be in the water, I'd have gills." At that moment, I would have gladly swapped his idea of fun for a chance to get a filling without novacaine.

With much coaxing, however, I finally eased into the 3-foot-deep water, then moved away from the edge of the pool and tried a back float. It took a few tries, and I wasn't graceful, but I didn't go to the bottom either. After mastering that, I began to feel a bit more confident. Maybe I could learn to swim after all.

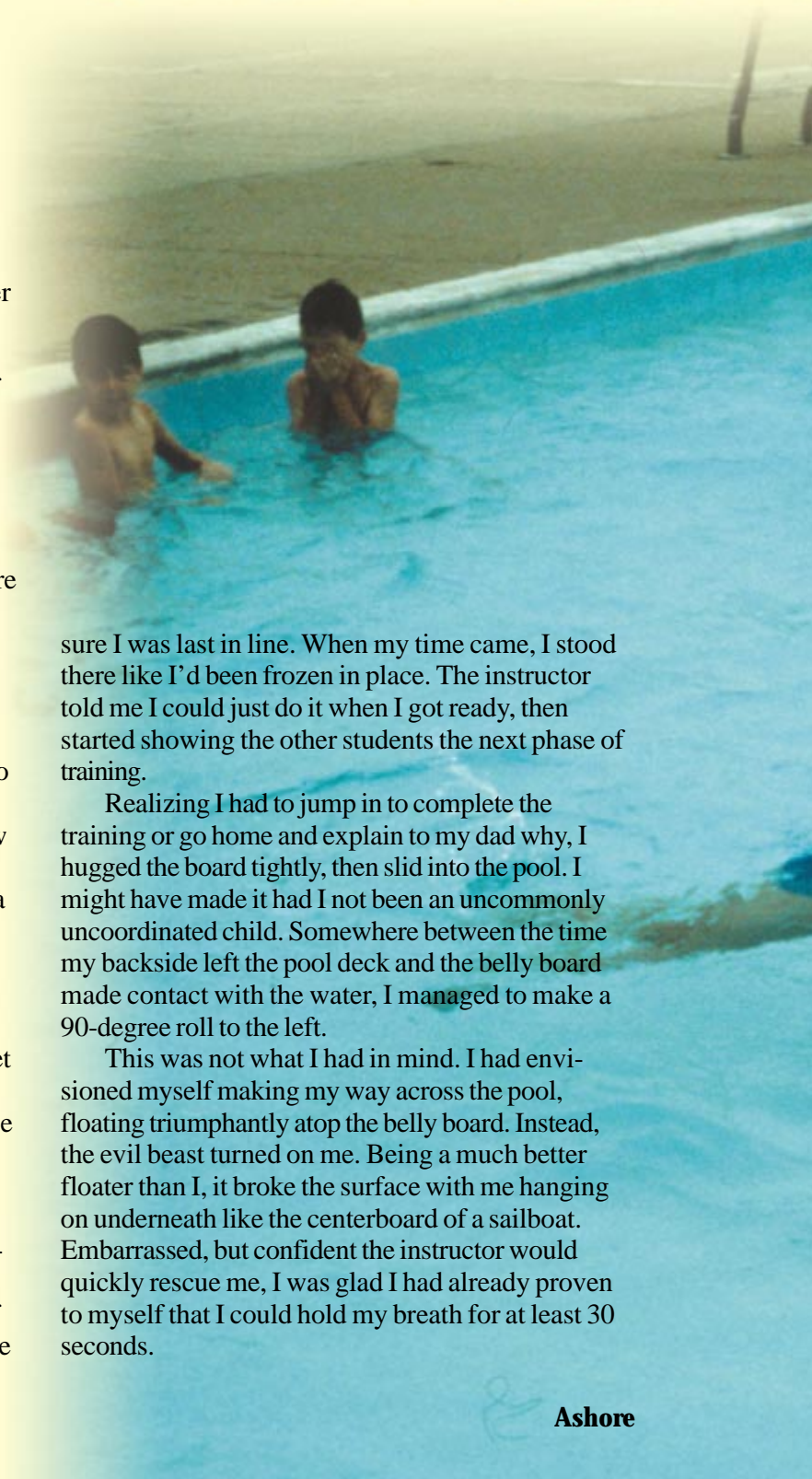
Once the entire class had proven they could float, the instructor introduced us to the belly board. The point of the whole thing, he explained, was to let the board keep us afloat while we used our legs to practice a kick he'd shown us. We would actually be able to go somewhere in the water.

This seemed reasonable to me, and even fun, until he told us he wanted us to grasp the board and get in at the 5-foot-deep mark. I was no mathematical genius, but even I knew that water 5 feet deep was well above my head. I decided I needed lots of time to observe others mastering this task, so I made

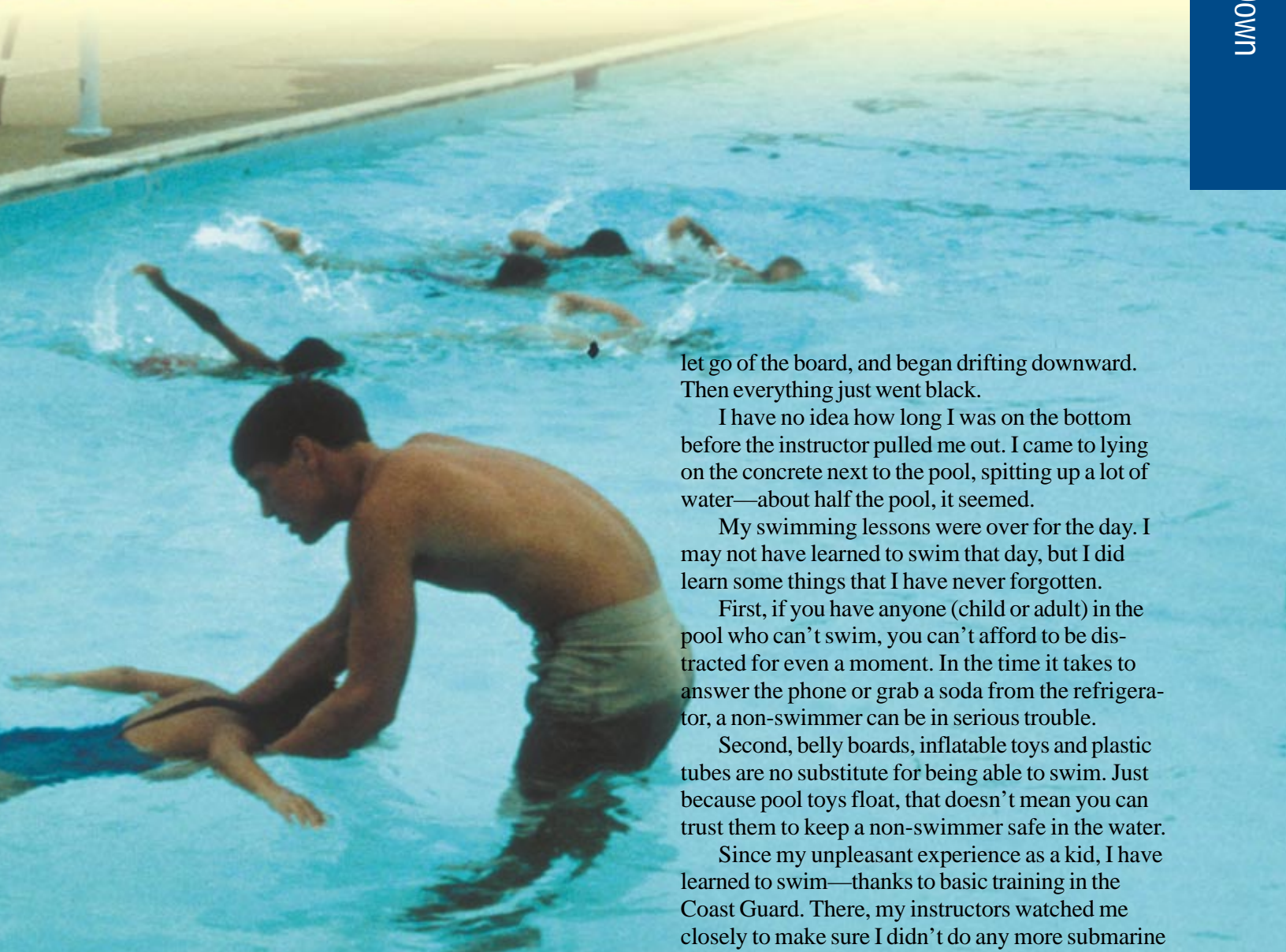
sure I was last in line. When my time came, I stood there like I'd been frozen in place. The instructor told me I could just do it when I got ready, then started showing the other students the next phase of training.

Realizing I had to jump in to complete the training or go home and explain to my dad why, I hugged the board tightly, then slid into the pool. I might have made it had I not been an uncommonly uncoordinated child. Somewhere between the time my backside left the pool deck and the belly board made contact with the water, I managed to make a 90-degree roll to the left.

This was not what I had in mind. I had envisioned myself making my way across the pool, floating triumphantly atop the belly board. Instead, the evil beast turned on me. Being a much better floater than I, it broke the surface with me hanging on underneath like the centerboard of a sailboat. Embarrassed, but confident the instructor would quickly rescue me, I was glad I had already proven to myself that I could hold my breath for at least 30 seconds.



Learn To Swim and the Coast Guard



So I hung there and waited...and waited. As my lungs reached the bursting point, I realized I wasn't going to be rescued. It was a terrifying feeling to be hanging there helplessly. Finally, I couldn't hold my breath any longer. As I gasped, I felt the water rush into my throat. Suddenly, nothing mattered anymore. I wasn't scared, and I wasn't in any pain. I relaxed,

let go of the board, and began drifting downward. Then everything just went black.

I have no idea how long I was on the bottom before the instructor pulled me out. I came to lying on the concrete next to the pool, spitting up a lot of water—about half the pool, it seemed.

My swimming lessons were over for the day. I may not have learned to swim that day, but I did learn some things that I have never forgotten.

First, if you have anyone (child or adult) in the pool who can't swim, you can't afford to be distracted for even a moment. In the time it takes to answer the phone or grab a soda from the refrigerator, a non-swimmer can be in serious trouble.

Second, belly boards, inflatable toys and plastic tubes are no substitute for being able to swim. Just because pool toys float, that doesn't mean you can trust them to keep a non-swimmer safe in the water.

Since my unpleasant experience as a kid, I have learned to swim—thanks to basic training in the Coast Guard. There, my instructors watched me closely to make sure I didn't do any more submarine impersonations. They also kept pool-safety equipment, such as a 12-foot-long pole with an attached life ring, handy. More than once, I had to rely on that pole when I was in the deep end of the pool.

I can also tell you firsthand that drowning is a terrifying experience. I was lucky to live through it, and it's certainly nothing you want to happen to someone you love. 