

**ACTIVITY:** Swimming

**CASE:** GSAF 1942.11.01 / SA-067

**DATE:** Sunday November 1, 1942

**LOCATION:** The attack took place at Clifton, Western Cape Province, South Africa. Clifton, a residential suburb of Cape Town, is eight kilometres from Table Bay. It is sheltered from the southeasterly wind by Lion's Head Mountain. Its four sandy beaches are separated by rocky projections of the mountain.

*33°56,2'S, 18°22,5'E*



**NAME:** Willem Johannes Bergh

**DESCRIPTION:** He was an 18-year-old male, and described as well-built and a good swimmer. He was a second-year medical student at the University of Cape Town.

### **BACKGROUND**

**WEATHER:** No meteorological data is available, but according to press reports it was a sunny day with no wind.

**MOON PHASE:** Third Quarter, November 1, 1942

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The sea was clear, cold and calm with very little surf.

**ENVIRONMENT:** There had been no sightings of sharks at Clifton that morning, but Mr. M.A. Smorrenberg, the Beach Superintendent, said that in the past large sharks had been seen even closer to the shore than the one that attacked Bergh. For a number of years Smorrenberg used a rifle to chase away the sharks but his weapon had been taken "in the general confiscation".

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** 20 to 30 metres

**DEPTH:** Two metres

**TIME:** 12h30

**NARRATIVE:** Willem Bergh, Elizabeth Hugo, and two friends were spending the day together at the shore. Hundreds of people crowded the beach but few were in the sea. Moments after Bergh entered the water he was attacked; he swam only a few strokes when the shark approached from the side, grabbed him by the shoulder and lifted him from the water. Johannes Jacobus Moller was swimming a few metres away from Bergh at the time and reported that Bergh freed himself, swam two strokes but the shark grabbed him again. The shark bit Bergh at mid-torso, blood spouted into the air and he was pulled beneath the surface of the water. Bergh's arm and head reappeared for a moment, then disappeared. Witnesses said that the shark, carrying Bergh's body in its jaws, swam parallel to the beach and headed out to sea in the direction of Bantry Point.

**INJURY:** Fatal, Bergh's body was never recovered.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** Police Constable Karl Gregorius Hoffman, who witnessed the attack, said that the shark was between 4,5 and six metres in length. The location of the attack, physical description and behaviour of the shark, suggest that the incident involved a white shark.

**SOURCES:** Natal Daily News, November 28, 1942; Cape Argus, January 16, 1959

# SAW STUDENT KILLED BY SHARK

28 NOV 1942

## TWO ATTACKS: THEN HE DISAPPEARED

Daily News Correspondent

CAPETOWN, Saturday.—An inquest was held here to-day on Willem Johannes Bergh, a medical student who was seized by a shark while bathing in the sea at Clifton.

Elizabeth Hugo, a nurse at the Volks hospital, said she and Bergh and two other friends went to Clifton for the day on November 1. They camped near the rocks. Immediately after lunch Bergh, who was a very good swimmer, went for a bathe and never returned.

Police Constable Karl Gregorius Hofman said he was walking on Fourth Beach at Clifton when he saw a shark grab at a man who was swimming 25 to 30 yards from the shore.

There was a struggle in the water. The man got loose and made two swimming strokes towards the shore when the shark attacked him again and disappeared with him under the water.

Constable Gert Jeremiah Nel, who was standing at the water's edge, said that after the shark first attacked the man the two came to the surface about two yards apart and the man swam away a yard or two before the shark again practically lifted him out of the water and disappeared with him.

Neither the shark nor the man reappeared. He estimated the length of the shark from 15 to 18 feet.

The Magistrate returned a verdict that Bergh was killed by a shark.

2 NOV 1942

# Shark Kills Capetown Bather

Johannes Bergh, an 18-year-old medical student of the University of Capetown, was killed by a shark in the presence of a large crowd of people while bathing at Clifton yesterday, says a Capetown message.

Bergh was about 40 yards out from the beach when he was attacked, and was only a few yards from the other bathers. The shark was not noticed until it attacked Bergh, who quickly fought himself free and tried to get away. The shark again attacked him, however, and seized him by the middle of the body.

At this instant the shark's dorsal fin was seen above the water. Bergh's head and arm appeared for a moment, but then disappeared. A large patch of blood appeared on the water, but no more was seen of the shark or its victim.

By this time all the bathers were out of the water, and boats went out to search for the body. The search lasted until late yesterday afternoon, but proved in vain.

Great confusion arose on the beach, as it was not possible to establish immediately who had been the shark's victim. It was some time before Bergh was missed.

Bergh went to Clifton in the morning with a number of friends, including Mrs. Kellerman, wife of Mr. J. Kellerman, of the National Savings organisation, with whom he boarded in Capetown. He was a good swimmer, and expressed a wish to swim to the rocks a few hundred yards from the Fourth Beach. He added that he was careful about sharks.

At about 12.30, when the incident occurred, there was a considerable number of people in the water. Nobody could give an exact description of the person attacked, but from the descriptions available and from the fact that Bergh was in the water at the time and was afterwards missed, it was deduced that he was the victim.

He was the only son of Mr. and Mrs. W. J. Bergh, of Upington.—(S.A.P.A.)

# *The Savage Shark*


GARY HASELAU

'Shark!'

There are few other cries which can instil such fear into human beings, probably because no other creature can wound a man so ruthlessly and viciously nor devour one so quickly, leaving no trace except for a swirling patch of pinkish blood in the water.

There are not many who are in a position to refute this statement, though there are some groups—particularly in the East and Black Africa—who do not believe sharks really eat people. And there is that fairly distinctive and vocal section of the community who seem to be fixed on the idea that sharks serve no other purpose in their marine environment than to drastically reduce the human population wherever they may be encountered.

These, obviously, are extreme opinions. The truth lies somewhere in between. I personally have skindived on occasion in the presence of numbers of potentially dangerous sharks without being given even a second glance. But I can also vouch for the fact that on occasion sharks can and do devour people whole.



In 1942 I was present on Fourth Beach, Clifton, Cape Town, when a young university student was completely devoured by a large shark. We lived in a house overlooking the beach and my parents were eyewitnesses of the tragedy. Two swimmers were returning to the shore when the shark attacked the one within 20 metres of the beach. The water was calm, clear and cold. The shark was estimated to be well in excess of 7 metres long. It must have been a blue pointer or white death (same shark, different names) judging from its size and ferocity.

The shark approached the swimmer from the

side and apparently with one bite severed both legs. These were presumably eaten as the scene was now obscured by billows of blood pumping into the water from the swimmer who was feebly attempting to reach the shore. But soon the shark was seen to approach once again and this time almost the entire body was engulfed in its maw. Just the arms and head of the unfortunate victim were showing as the enormous fish turned and swam leisurely out to sea.

Throughout my skindiving career this incident, so indelibly engraved on my young mind, has been the prime factor governing my attitude towards the shark. Whenever I am swimming with sharks, either photographing them or on some other bent, I am always aware of those incredible teeth and slashing jaws. Surely no one today, in South Africa and Australia particularly, needs proof of the potential ferocity of the shark.

On the other hand, under good conditions, no skindiver need have excessive fear of the shark. By good conditions I mean reasonably clear and shallow water. Under these conditions sharks are seldom aggressive unless provoked in some way. In deep open water, however, the situation is often very different. Sharks found in the open sea are more likely to be in groups and are often aggressive. This in itself is not necessarily a problem, so long as there is a boat near by and the diver has some kind of long object, a stick or a speargun, to ward off the first attacks when they come. In this kind of situation divers should leave the water as soon as the first shark appears. If you wait until they become aggressive, it may be too late.

Diving or swimming in murky waters which