ACTIVITY: Treading water

CASE: 1947.03.09 / SA-089

DATE: Sunday March 9, 1947

LOCATION: The incident took place at Country Club Beach, Durban, five kilometres north of the entrance to Durban Harbor in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. 29°49.5’S, 31°02.2’E

NAME: Gabriel Petrus Botha

DESCRIPTION: The swimmer, a 22-year-old male, was well tanned and had sun-bleached hair. He was 1.73 metres tall, weighed 79 kilograms and was clad in black woolen swimming trunks but wore no jewelry. He was a member of Pirates Surf Life-saving Club and had been bitten by a shark at Country Club Beach on March 26, 1944.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: On the day of the incident the sky was sunny, but two days earlier, on March 7, KwaZulu-Natal experienced the first cold snap of the season as a cold front moved through the province bringing gale-force winds and widespread rain.

MOON PHASE: Full Moon, March 7, 1947

SEA CONDITIONS: According to one report the water was turbid but Botha says the water was clear, the sand was simply churned up near the water’s edge because of the heavy shore-dump. A south-to-north current was running and a channel was present. Low tide was at 11h48.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: Between 65 and 80 metres

DEPTH: Two metres

TIME: About 12h00

NARRATIVE: Lou Johnson was on a white canvas Crocker ski but the waves inshore were too small for body-surfing and Gabriel Botha had moved farther offshore. He was slightly north of the Country Club Beach bathing area, just out of calling range, and he was alone. He had taken a few rides and was treading water over a sandbank, facing seaward and watching another set of waves build up. Suddenly, something grabbed his right foot. He gave a violent kick and turned on his back to swim back to the beach. As he did so, he felt a sharp pain in his buttock. "With that I swung around again and saw the shark on the surface just a few feet away," said Botha, "and I could see both the snout and the tail of the shark". He body-surfed back to the shallows and, when he attempted to walk in knee-deep water, realized that his foot was badly injured. Botha hailed a couple who notified the life-savers and he was brought ashore.

INJURY: The right foot was bitten and there was a crescent of 1.27-centimetre-long deep lacerations in his buttocks. Teeth marks were also visible in his bathing suit.

FIRST AID: Life-savers reached Botha in the shallows, placed him on a stretcher and carried him into the clubhouse to wait for the ambulance. The ambulance was a modified
truck (bakkie) and the stretcher had wheels which fit into rails in the rear of the ambulance and was secured in place by a bolt. In their haste, the life-savers forgot to secure the bolt before the ambulance raced off to the hospital. "In those days," recalls Botha, "Addington Hospital's casualty department was located at the end of a steep driveway. As the ambulance screamed around the corner into Casualty, the stretcher went off the rails and sailed down the street. When the ambulance screeched to a halt at the Casualty station, the attendants asked "Where's the patient?". They found me hopping down the street."

TREATMENT: Botha remained in Addington Hospital for about a month. He was treated there by Drs. Aufrichtige and Pearson.

SPECIES INVOLVED: According to Botha his incident involved a blacktip shark at least two metres in length.

COMMENT: Botha remained an active life-saver. In 1957 he was manager of the Springbok Life-saving Club that toured Australia.

SOURCE: Interviews with Gabriel Botha by Marie Levine

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Marie Levine

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BITTEN BY SHARK FOR SECOND TIME

Mr. G. P. Botha, aged 22, of 69 Churchill Road, Durban, was bitten in the left foot by a shark yesterday morning while swimming off the Durban Country Club Beach. This was the second time Mr. Botha has suffered shark bites, as it was only three years ago, in March, 1944, that he had his left thigh lacerated. Lifesavers of the Pirates and Municipal Lifesaving Clubs saw him in difficulties some way below the proper bathing portion and rushed to his rescue.

They found Botha sitting in the shallow water holding the pressure point of his left leg to check the flow of blood.

One of the lifesavers held the pressure point while a stretcher was fetched and an ambulance called. A telephone call was made from the beach to Addington Hospital to prepare them to receive Botha, but all these arrangements nearly failed because of motorists who refused to make way for the ambulance, which they delayed by a full five minutes.

Members of the lifesaving clubs concerned were bitter in their comments on these motorists when a “Natal Mercury” reporter spoke to them.

DUTY OF MOTORISTS

Commenting on the incident, Inspector R. Johnston, Chief of the Durban City Police, told “The Natal Mercury” that all motorists on hearing either the police or ambulance siren must pull into the side of the road and leave the way clear.

“Sirens,” he said, “are never used unless there is a very important reason. Therefore motorists must get off the road as it may mean the fractional difference of time to save a patient’s life.”

Mr. Botha’s father told “The Natal Mercury” last night that his son had been operated on and he considered he was making good progress. He added that although his son was captain of the Pirates Lifesaving Club, he was always solicitous about discussing batters who had got into difficulties and whom he had assisted.

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