

ACTIVITY: Free diving for abalone

CASE: [GSAF 1959.06.14.a](#)

DATE: Sunday, June 14, 1959

LOCATION: The attack took place in the Pacific Ocean at Alligator Head, located at the west end of La Jolla Cove in La Jolla, San Diego County, California, USA.

32°51.3'N; 117°16.5'W

NAME: Robert Pamperin

DESCRIPTION: He was a 33-year-old male. He was wearing blue swim fins, a pink bathing suit, a black mask and black diving gloves, and carried a yellow-handled abalone iron. A black inner tube, with an attached burlap sack, was being utilized by the two divers and was also in the same area.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The sky was slightly overcast and the air temperature was 21°C.

MOON PHASE: 53% of the Moon was illuminated. First Quarter, June 13, 1959.

SEA CONDITIONS: Underwater visibility was seven metres.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 50 metres.

DEPTH OF WATER: Six to seven fathoms

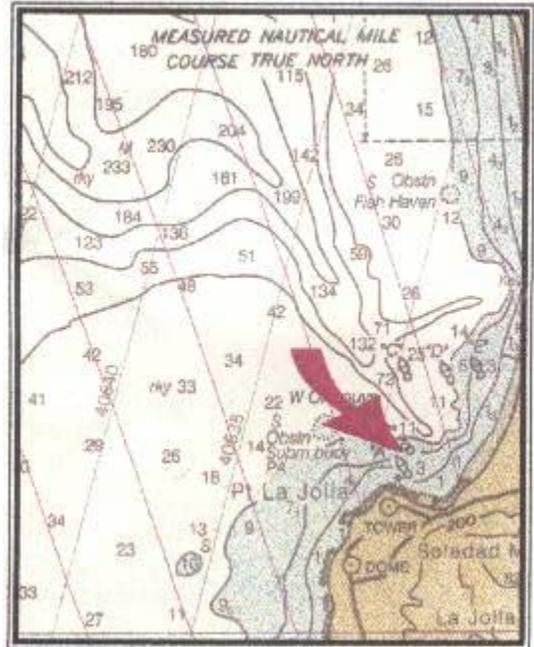
TIME: 17h10

NARRATIVE: Robert Pamperin and his diving companion, 30-year-old Gerald Lehrer, had slowly drifted away from one another until separated by 10 to 15 metres, with Lehrer 20 metres from the point and Pamperin 30 to 40 metres.

Unexpectedly, Lehrer heard Pamperin yell out, "Help me!" Turning quickly in the direction from which he heard the voice, he saw his companion upright and unnaturally high out of the water, with his mask missing. Lehrer began swimming toward his friend, thinking he might have a cramp. While looking at Pamperin, Lehrer later recounted, "Suddenly everything was moving in slow motion." He watched in disbelief as his friend slowly disappeared beneath the surface of the crimson water. Startled, Lehrer quickly dived beneath the surface to see Pamperin in the jaws of a shark he estimated to be more than seven metres in length.

As this drama was unfolding, William Abitz stood on an elevated rock formation that overlooked the attack site. He was alerted to the event by Pamperin's cries for help. Abitz recounted, "Pamperin was thrashing as if he were trying to run away from something, then he disappeared below the surface."

In the water, Lehrer could see his friend in the mouth of the shark, his legs not visible. He surfaced just long enough to gasp a breath of air, then dived under to try and help his friend. He observed the shark lying in a sandy area on the bottom, jerking from side to side. It appeared the shark was trying to either swallow or spit out Pamperin.



Lehrer returned to the surface, inhaled air and dived under the water again. He swam toward the bottom, waving his arms frantically in an attempt to frighten the shark away, but it ignored him and kept twisting back and forth.

Realizing nothing could be done, Lehrer swam toward the beach, being met 10 to 15 meters from shore by Abitz, who had swum out to assist the diver. Upon reaching shore, they located lifeguards, who informed local authorities of the attack.

Within less than an hour, 10 highly qualified scuba divers, including Conrad Limbaugh of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, spent an estimated two hours searching the attack location in an unsuccessful attempt to locate Pamperin. United States Coast Guard helicopter pilot Harold B. MacDuffy observed a blue swim fin floating at the surface, as well as a dead seal or sea lion, *Zalophus californicus*, but did not see any sharks. Several hours following the attack, Pamperin's inner tube, containing two abalone, *Haliotis sp.*, was recovered at the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club.

Following the attack on Pamperin, much deliberation was – and since then has been – given by researchers to the species of shark responsible for this attack. This uncertainty may be due to its close proximity in time to Albert Kogler's fatal attack just one month earlier or to several unsubstantiated rumors. In either case, the following is what is known about the shark, the attack location and some related circumstances, which until now have gone unreported.

The following four events occurred prior to the attack on Pamperin and may have been contributory. First, fewer than two hours before the attack, several Yellowtail, *Seriola dorsalis*, were speared by divers near the attack site. In addition to body fluids, the low-frequency vibrations produced by a speared fish are known to attract sharks. Second, an hour prior to the attack, a U.S. Navy sailor swimming off nearby rocks had badly lacerated himself, losing a considerable amount of blood while in the water. Third, 600 meters west of the cove is a small rookery of harbor seals, *Phoca vitulina*, a known prey of several apex marine predators. The fourth and final event might have been more contributory to the attack than any of the others. A dead whale (species unknown) washed up the night before onto the beach at La Jolla Shores, 800 meters north of where Pamperin was attacked. Surface currents and overnight winds could have dispersed the whale's body fluids to much of the cove, in addition to probably producing a "chum slick," or "odor corridor," to the open sea many hours before the attack. The untimely beaching of the whale could have attracted the predator responsible for this tragedy from many kilometers distant. The description of the shark, as given by Lehrer, is "over 20 feet [7 meters] in length with a white belly, grading to an even dark gray or black on top, with a blunt nose." He told the San Diego Union newspaper, "It was so big I thought at first it was a Killer Whale. It had a white belly and I could see its jaws and jagged teeth." Lehrer could recall no other blotches or markings on the shark.

The estimated length of the shark precludes almost all known potentially dangerous species common to the Pacific Coast, except the tiger shark and white shark. At best, the tiger shark, *Galeocerdo cuvier*, is only an infrequent, if not rare, visitor to Southern California, while the white shark is frequently observed and captured off the southern coast. Excluding the blunt nose, which could have been obscured by the victim, the description of Lehrer's shark more closely approximates the appearance of a white shark rather than a tiger shark.

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Further, Lehrer did not remember any markings on the shark, including vertical stripes often visible on the flanks of adult tiger sharks. He also told investigators that he could see Pamperin and the shark, including "its jaws and jagged teeth," quite clearly as they lay on the bottom 10 to 15 meters from his location. Comparison of tiger shark and white shark dentition demonstrates the improbability of Lehrer's being able to see any teeth from a distance of 10 metres or more except those of a large white shark. According to fossil-shark researcher Gordon Hubbell, the enamel height of white shark teeth is almost twice that of a tiger shark at comparable body lengths (Photograph at right courtesy Gordon Hubbell).



The reference to the shark's being as big as a killer whale, *Orcinus orca*, would seem to further support a white shark as being the assailant. This interpretation assumes that the reference pertains to the shark's coloration, length, and girth, appearing similar to that of a killer whale. Contrast between the black and white patterns for both white sharks and killer whales is similarly striking, as is the general body shape, especially when observed during the stressful, fleeting moments of a shark attack. These conclusions would seem to implicate a white shark as the causal species. Eyewitness testimony in support of this identification was obtained from the following newspaper article, which should put the question of shark species to rest. Because of the confusion that persisted for several days in local newspapers with certain aspects of the attack, Gerald Lehrer granted a final interview to the *San Diego Evening Tribune* on 18 June 1959. Lehrer emphatically stated, "What I saw was a white shark. I don't understand the confusion. The first time I was shown pictures of different kinds of sharks, I immediately recognized the white shark. I have never said anything else, but I have read and heard all kinds of speculation about other kinds of sharks. It was a white shark." There would seem to be little doubt that a white shark six to seven metres in length was responsible for Robert Pamperin's fatal shark attack.

SOURCES: Daniel Miller and Ralph Collier

Ralph Collier (2003), pages 21-24

Shark Research Committee, http://www.sharkresearchcommittee.com/unprovoked_diver.htm

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Ralph Collier



Alligator Head

Skeleton of Man Found by Divers	Oakland Tribune, E 3
LA JOLLA, Nov. 14—AP—A man's skeleton, found in the bottom of a submarine canyon in 80 feet of water, may be the remains of a skindiver killed by a shark in 1959, authorities report.	Monday, Nov. 14, 1960
The skeleton was recovered	This fits the description of Robert L. Pamperin, 33, who was last seen being pulled down by a big shark June 14, 1959, off La Jolla.