

ACTIVITY: Spearfishing / Freediving

CASE: [GSAF 1988.06.19](#) / SA-0367

DATE: Sunday June 19, 1988

LOCATION: The attack took place at Skulphoek, three kilometers from Hermanus in the Western Cape Province, South Africa.

34°S, 27°53'E

NAME: Willie van Rensburg

DESCRIPTION: The diver, a 36-year-old male, is 1.74 metres [5'8½"] tall and weighs 78 kilograms [172 lbs]. He was clad in a black three-millimeter wetsuit (longjohn and long-sleeve hooded jacket), grey face mask, green fins and red gloves. He carried a one-metre black speargun in his right hand, towed a white and pink float, and had no injuries before entering the water. An experienced spearfisherman, Van Rensburg is a member of the Western Province team and captain of the Boland spearfishing team.

BOAT: The support boat is a 4.4-metre [14'3"] yellow-hulled skiboat.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The air temperature was 18°C [64°F], the sky was partly cloudy, and there was a warm gentle 10-knot northwesterly breeze.

MOON PHASE: First Quarter, June 22, 1988.

SEA CONDITIONS: Sea temperature was estimated to be 14°C [57.2°F], a slight northwest to southeast current was flowing, and the tide was ebbing. The water was calm but there was a slight chop. Underwater visibility was nine metres and there was a slight suspension in the water.

ENVIRONMENT: The attack took place 50 metres from a colony of 20 to 30 Cape fur seals, *Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus*, and 25 metres from a stand of kelp. The diver reported that since 1986 a fish factory had been regularly dumping offal into the sea down-current from the incident site and during that time divers had noticed an

Diver survives attack by 'massive' shark

Mercury Correspondent

CAPE TOWN—A top Boland spearfisherman was yesterday savaged by a great white shark near Hermanus — and has lived to tell the tale.

Mr Willie van Rensburg, 36, a builder and the captain of the Boland spearfishing team, was attacked while diving with his son, Willie jun, and a friend, Willem von Thelemann, both 16, at Skilphoek near the town.

The shark, described as 'massive' by Willem jun, struck as his father surfaced from his first exploratory dive, seizing his left arm.

Speaking from his father's bedside in an intensive care unit in Newlands early last night, Willem jun said: 'There was blood in the water and my dad screamed. I got straight up on to the boat and he shouted for us to bring it closer.'

The two teenagers pulled the bleeding and shocked diver on board as the shark swam off and disappeared.

The boys cut the anchor rope of the boat and sped for Hermanus harbour with a pale and profusely bleeding Mr van Rensburg holding on grimly.

'We tied his arm up with some rope. His speargun is still floating there somewhere attached to its buoy,' said Willem, a Std 8 pupil at Hermanus High School.

When the trio arrived in the harbour some 15 minutes later, Mr van Rensburg had weakened considerably and

could barely talk, his son said.

They abandoned the boat and drove him to the Hermanus Hospital where his wounds were stitched and he was given emergency treatment for shock.

Mr van Rensburg was then taken by ambulance to the Newlands Surgical Clinic in Cape Town where a surgeon last night described his condition as 'stable but good'.

The arm was saved but Mr van Rensburg is to undergo an operation on the damaged limb today, the surgeon said.

The trio believe the shark was attracted to the area by a colony of seals and had mistaken a wetsuit-clad Mr van Rensburg for a seal.

increase in shark activity around Hermanus. He also commented that the main sewage outlet of Hermanus is almost directly opposite the spot where he was bitten.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 100 to 200 metres

DISTANCE FROM BOAT: 20 metres

DEPTH OF WATER AT ACCIDENT SITE: 15 metres

TIME: 09h15

NARRATIVE: Willie van Rensburg was diving with his son, 16-year-old Willie junior, and his son's friend, 16-year-old Willem von Thelemann. They anchored the boat in 15 metres of water. Willie junior was the first to enter the water, but he stayed close to the boat and waited for Von Thelemann who was putting on his wetsuit. Van Rensburg entered the water, swam a short distance and made two exploratory dives. As he surfaced from the second dive the shark seized his left arm. He did not see the shark before he was bitten; he felt a weight on his arm and then saw the pointed snout of the shark. The shark pushed the diver about two metres through the water, then it released him and disappeared.

"There was blood in the water and my dad screamed," said his son. "I got back on the boat and got the motor started. By then my dad had reached the side of the boat and we pulled him on board."

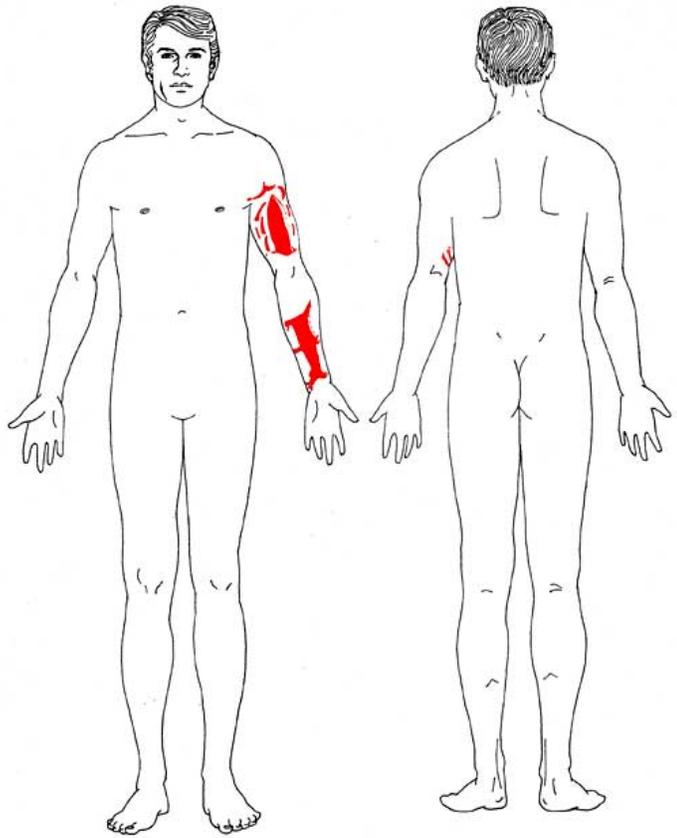
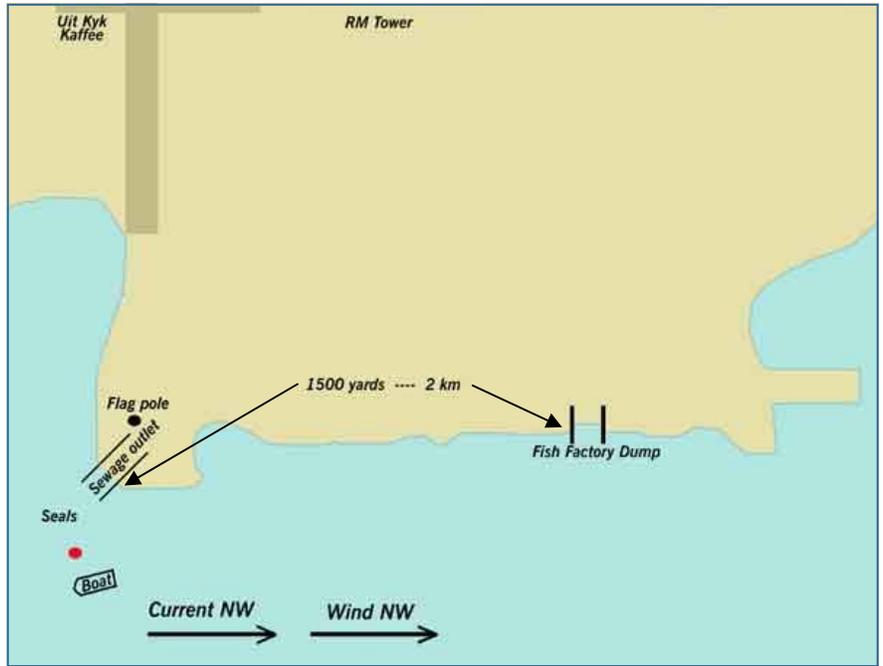
INJURY: Van Rensburg's left arm was badly lacerated and his brachial artery was severed. Gaps between the individual tooth marks varied from 1.5 to two centimeters.

FIRST AID: The young divers tied a tourniquet on his arm with rope and headed for Hermanus Harbour 20 minutes away. They left the boat in the harbour, placed Van Rensburg in the back of his bakkie, and drove to Hermanus Hospital ten minutes away. At Hermanus Hospital, the diver was treated by Dr. Strandvick. His wounds were sutured and he was treated for shock. At 11h30, when the diver's vital signs were stable, he was transported by ambulance to Cape Town.

TREATMENT: He was treated at Newlands Surgical Clinic by Dr. Tony Miles and underwent surgical repair on June 20, 1988. It was found the injury was more serious than was initially believed; muscle tissue in the arm had been torn away from the nerve bed, and a second surgical procedure was performed two days later.

SPECIES: Seals are a favored prey item of mature white sharks. The presence of seals in the immediate vicinity of the attack, the population of white sharks in the area and the behaviour of the shark suggest that the incident involved a white shark, as does the nature of the injuries and the diver's description of the shark. It is likely that a white shark was attracted to the area by the seals and may have either regarded the diver as a potential competitor for its food source or, less likely, that it mistook the wetsuit-clad diver for a seal. The shark disappeared after biting Van Rensburg and was not seen by the divers again. The behaviour of the shark (i.e. a single crippling bite, swimming away while the prey weakens from blood loss until it can offer little resistance) could fit the white shark hunting method described by Dr. John McCosker. In this case, however, the diver was rescued so we don't know if the shark would have returned.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Marie Levine



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