

**ACTIVITY:** Surfing

**CASE** GSAF 1990.07.06 / SA-381

**DATE:** Sunday May 6, 1990

**LOCATION:** The attack took place in the Indian Ocean at Cintsa East, 28 kilometres northeast of the entrance to East London harbour, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

32°50'S, 28°07'E



**NAME:** Richard William Forrester

**DESCRIPTION:** The surfer, a 22-year-old male, is 1,85 metres tall and weighs 79 kilograms. He was wearing a three-millimetre black wetsuit with white markings and had a blue leash attached to his left ankle. He wore no jewelry and had no injuries prior to the incident.

**SURFBOARD:** The board, a 1,9-metre triffin manufactured by Andrew Carter, has a blue, yellow, red and green deck, a white under-surface, and three black fins.

### BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** The sky was sunny, the temperature was 25° to 30°C, and there was a light southwesterly breeze.

**MOON PHASE:** Waxing Gibbous 90% of the Moon was illuminated. Full Moon, May 9, 1990.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The sea was clear blue; visibility was at least ten metres, and the water temperature was 22°C. Mean high tide occurred at 13h53 and the incident took place three days before spring tides.

**ENVIRONMENT:** The entrance to the lagoon had been closed for about a week. The incident took place seawards of a gulley which ran parallel to shore and a two-metre-deep channel ran alongside the rocks 60 metres to the surfer's right. No dolphins were seen, nor was there any evidence of unusual fish activity.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** 100 metres

**DEPTH:** Five metres

**TIME:** 12h00

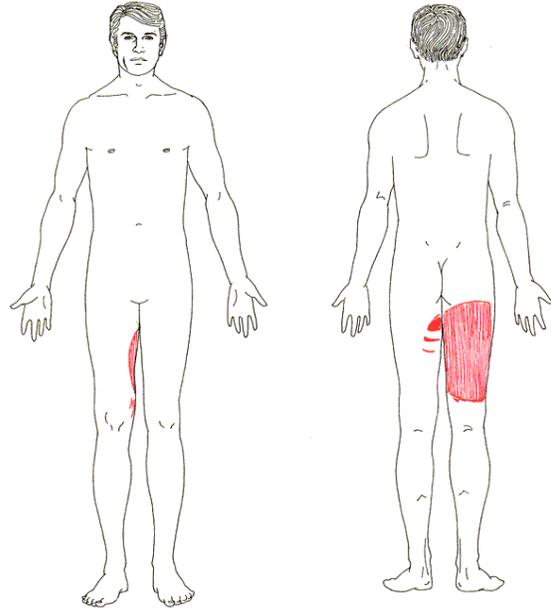
**NARRATIVE:** Six people were on the beach, four were in the water, but only one may have been within 20 metres of Richard Forrester. He had been surfing for 15 minutes and a friend, James Law, was riding a boogie board. "I was facing seaward, resting on my board and waiting for a wave," said Forrester. "The shark must have approached from the west (my right) and behind. I saw a flash of white out of the corner of my eye and the next thing I knew I was under the water on the shark's left, being dragged under. I was facing sideways and upwards. I remember seeing these enormous blue grey gills about 40 centimetres long. I realised then what had happened and thought that if I wanted to survive I had better think about this. I didn't panic at all (but I've never been one to panic). I felt around for the shark's eyes, couldn't find them, closed my eyes and tried to picture a shark and where the eyes were situated. I then bent forward again, put my hand over the shark's head, moving from front to back until I found the right eye into which I stuck my index and middle fingers and gouged. The shark then literally vanished without trace." (The attack lasted no more than 30 seconds.)

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"I swam to the surface, got onto my board, shouted "shark" as there were kids in the shallow water, and paddled, catching a wave to shore. James came in and helped me out at once. I was about waist-deep and I remember seeing this huge flap of flesh flap out."

Forrester was retrieved from waist-deep by James Law and his friends. They placed him on the beach and notified lifesaver Brian Breetzke.

**INJURY:** In the posterior of the right thigh there was a deep and large incision caused by the teeth of the upper jaw of the shark. The teeth cut down to and beyond the femur and severed the sciatic nerve in two places: at the top of the thigh and above the knee. The wound was 15 to 20-centimetres deep (including edema). Surgeon Kerry Allerton described the wounds as clean-cut. The teeth of the shark had incised or ruptured the capsule of the popliteal artery, but the artery was intact. Teeth marks were evident on the femur and tooth fragments of the shark were recovered during surgery. There were superficial incisions on the anterior surface of the thigh, the largest was three centimetres in length.



On the inner side of the left thigh skin, opposite the wound on the right thigh, there were three incisions where skin, subcutaneous tissue and fat had been removed by the upper teeth of the shark.

The surfer's head was lacerated, but this injury was caused by the fin of his surfboard.

**FIRST AID:** When notified of the attack, Brian Breetzke phoned immediately for an ambulance. He monitored vital signs, examined the wound and saw that it was not bleeding and required no haemostatic intervention, checked his pulse which was tachycardic and thready (faint and weak), covered him with a blanket and shaded him from the sun. Two doctors staying at a nearby resort attempted to put up a drip and packed his wound with disposable nappies. Twenty minutes after the attack two doctors from Frere Hospital arrived with a drip and morphine: Dr Jan-Marie van de Westhuizen and Dr Mark Painter. At this point the wound was not bleeding significantly at all indicating severe hypovolaemia and the peripheral (radial) pulse was absent, only his carotid could be felt and the rate was 60/minute. His peripheral circulation was very poor and he was unconscious and unrousable. These two doctors also attempted to get up a line; both teams of doctors succeeded roughly simultaneously and each ran in one litre of fluid as fast as possible. Richard then began to come around and groggily mentioned that he needed a stiff brandy. Instead, he was given 10 mg of morphine intramuscularly "which seemed to do the trick". At this point Richard thought he had been unconscious for seconds, not 25 minutes. He says he realised that he had been "on his way out" but he "wasn't ready to go yet and on no account must he close his eyes again". Metro arrived but their vehicle was not equipped to deal with a full length prostrate body so he was put on a board and carried over the beach

by friends, up the dunes (no small feat) and onto the road where the ambulance was waiting for him. Drs v.d. Westhuizen and Painter phoned Frere Hospital, ordered O-Negative blood to be on standby and notified casualty of Forrester's arrival.

**TREATMENT:** Forrester was taken by ambulance to Frere Hospital, East London, reaching there about 90 minutes after the attack. On arrival his doctor, Dr Matthews, surgeon Dennis Smythe, and orthopedist Kerry Allerton were waiting. Forrester was given twelve units (six litres) of blood. Amputation was considered because the sciatic nerve was severed in two places and the risk of septicemia high. Richard's father refused to allow amputation and a debridement was done instead. Forrester came out of surgery at 17h00.

Forrester proved to be an unusually positive patient said his doctor, Jacqui Stone. "The fact that he survived is remarkable and this is largely due to two factors: a) the resuscitation he received on the beach and b) a will to live."

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** Ski-boat fishermen who witnessed the incident sped over to assist. Their boat was four metres in length and they estimated that the shark, which surfaced alongside, was 5,5-metres. The tooth fragments recovered from the surfer's wounds confirm that the attack involved a white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*.

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Marie Levine



At left is a South African two-cent coin. At center is a tooth from the upper jaw of a white shark. At right are two of the tooth fragments recovered from Richard Forrester's leg.