

**ACTIVITY:** Wading

**CASE:** GSAF 1994.04.06

**DATE:** Wednesday April 6, 1994

**LOCATION:** The accident took place in a salt water-fed lake on Rum Cay, Bahamas.

**NAME:** Scott Curatolo-Wagemann

**DESCRIPTION:** He is a 5'7" tall male, and weighs approximately 145 pounds. He was wearing a hat, t-shirt, cut off shirt, shorts and was barefoot. He wore a single gold hoop earring in his left ear.

### BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** The weather was pleasant with a few clouds. The air temperature was ~80°F.

**MOON PHASE:** Third Quarter, April 2, 1994. New Moon, April 10, 1994.

**DEPTH OF WATER:** Three feet

**TIME:** 10h30

**NARRATIVE:** "The attack occurred during my time on the *Spirit of Massachusetts*. It is a 125-foot schooner sailboat used for marine and seamanship education. I was a student of Long Island University's Southampton College in New York, where there was a popular program called SeaMester. Being this was the spring semester, the boat started in the Virgin Islands, spent time in the Caribbean and would sail up the Atlantic Coast to end on the North Fork of eastern Long Island, New York."



Scott Curatolo-Wagemann

"We were anchored off the small island of Rum Cay in the Bahamas chain. Most field trips were related to course work, or to view the natural fauna of that particular island. On this day, we were looking at mangrove swamp ecology and to view "Suicide Sluice". Suicide Sluice was a slang name for the area where the water drains from the lake into the Atlantic Ocean to form white water rapids. There were a total of 22 students, (all of which were present, that day I believe) 2 professors and the 2<sup>nd</sup> mate of the ship. A one-man kayak was brought along in case of emergency or if the water got too deep for a student."

"As we were crossing the lake (a salt-water fed lake), the bottom got increasingly rocky, and the limestone mud was pulling at my feet, so I removed my sneakers. Of the 25 people I was on the far right of the group, with everyone to my left. I was talking to the person on my immediate left, when I heard the sound of rushing water. Since the water was barely over my knees (mid-thigh, if I remember), I was only just able to see that the rush of water was coming from only 10 feet away, and heading towards me. I didn't have time to make out that much, other than its size (2 to 3 feet long), and shape (torpedo-like). The next instant I felt the impact, as the shark connected with my right calf. The impact forced my leg back, but I maintained my balance as I looked into the now-murky water in front of me to see what it was. Nothing was seen, and I felt no pain, except the pain of the initial impact. Because the

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leg that had been bitten was now behind my field of view, I didn't see any blood. I could tell that the leg was tender, and I had most, if not all of my weight on my left leg. At that point someone commented on the amount of blood in the water. I reached down into the water to feel the outside of my calf, and realized that I was feeling inside my leg. I told everyone that the wound felt pretty bad, and immediately one of my classmates took control of the situation. He was a former Eagle Scout and knew first aid. Without inspecting the wound, he asked for peoples' t-shirts, and wrapped them around my leg."

The kayak was brought over, and I was lifted onto it, as I was towed back to shore. Meanwhile the ship's 2nd mate had rushed back to shore to try and find help. Rum Cay is not a very populated island; about 50-60 people live there year-round. But as luck would have it, he found a winter resident who not only had a car, but also his own Cessna. He was vacationing on the island, but lived only a few towns over from where I grew up in New York. When the kayak reached the shore, sticks supported it, and the kayak and myself were carried over land. After about a third of a mile, the resident arrived with the 2nd mate in the resident's jeep. We were taken to his house, where we radioed to the ship for the ship's medical officer. At the house, the t-shirts were removed and the wound was inspected. At this point the severity of the wound was seen, and it was determined that I needed further treatment. I was given aspirin at this point, and they tried calling the nearest island of San Salvador, but the doctor was not on the island at that time. They next called Long Island, about 30 miles southwest, and found they had a clinic. I was loaded onto the Cessna and made the half hour trip to Long Island."

"At the Stella Marie Clinic, I was given painkillers, as it was then obvious that I would require surgery. The clinic was not set up for this, so I was then flown by a different plane to Nassau, since the resident's Cessna was found to have a problem, as we landed on Long Island with only one set of brakes. So, one of the professors and myself were flown to Nassau where I was admitted sometime after 3PM, more than five hours after the attack. I was operated on that night, and a nearly three-hour operation cleaned out the wound and I received over 50 stitches. I spent three days in the hospital before I was flown home to New York."

"From my own studies on the area, and from accounts from people that live on the island, I can only conclude that it was a lemon shark. The locals don't go in the lake, they know that the lemon sharks use it as a breeding ground. So based on the size (two to three feet long), I can only guess that it was probably a juvenile shark that was spooked by 25 people wading through the water, and I got a little too close to it."

**After effects:**

"After I was home in NY, I spent several weeks going to different specialists. After a month I was told that there was good news and bad news; the good — I wouldn't need physical therapy; the bad — because it wouldn't do any good. The damage was such that the muscles and tendons that control my right ankle were severed beyond repair. At the time I was told that I could have a tendon transfer and it may help with ankle control, but I couldn't afford it at the time. I was fitted with a special-made fiberglass brace that I was told I would have to use for the rest of my life. I've always been very active, so I was determined not to let this affect me too much. I knew I would have to take it slowly. After 6 months I noticed that the strength in my leg was returning, and I started using the brace

less and less. After about eight months I was able to go about my normal activities without the brace. Occasionally, if I was on my feet all day, or on a long drive I would have to put it on. I have been extremely active in softball since the accident, and this is the only time I now wear the brace. I always keep the brace with me, although besides for sports, I haven't had to use it in a few years."

"The long term effects are that I can't raise my ankle (like tapping my foot), and I have no feeling on the outside portion of my leg below the bite. For instance, you can take an ice cube or match, hold it to my leg and I can't feel any difference in temperature. I also can't feel any light pressure on my leg. However, if the lower portion of my leg (where the bite was) hits anything with any sort of pressure, my whole leg collapses. The initial pain feels like hitting a funny bone in my leg, but the lasting pain is excruciating, lasting anywhere from five to 15 minutes."

"I don't really have any nightmares about the situation, but I do have "Jaws" type dreams. While this movie scared me to the point of nightmares when I saw it as a child, and was also responsible for my entering the marine biology field, the nightmares of a great white chasing me have increased since the accident. I don't recall ever having nightmares reliving my own shark bite."

"I'm a big supporter of shark conservation, although some have called me a hypocrite in that on the day of my bite, I celebrate "Shark Day". It is the only day out of the year that I eat shark."

"I consider myself lucky on so many levels. While the bite wasn't severe in itself, they were worried about the blood loss. I am generally an upbeat person, very optimistic, so I feel that this kept me in the right frame of mind when I needed it most. Since the accident occurred while I was finishing up BS degree, that was my primary focus at the time of the bite; to finish college. At the time it never occurred to me that the bite was that severe; I was only concerned with getting back on the boat, so I could finish and get my college degree."

"Sometimes people want to hear my story, but are afraid it will bring back painful memories for me. Because everything turned out ok in my eyes, I don't find it difficult to recount my experience."

"It's nice to read about the other survivors' stories. People are always amazed by my story and are awed to meet a shark attack survivor. It's nice to know that we now have a place to go, and after reading other survivor's stories, I can now say that I am awed to be in such company. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions."

**SPECIES:** The shark was not seen, but was thought to be a lemon shark, estimated to be between two and three feet in length.

**SOURCE:** Scott Curatolo-Wagemann