

ACTIVITY: Surfing
CASE GSAF 1996.05.28 / SA-424
DATE: Tuesday May 28, 1996
LOCATION: The Steps, Wilderness, Western Cape Province, South Africa.



NAME: Donovan Köhne
DESCRIPTION: The surfer, a 17-year-old white male, was a Standard 9 pupil at York High and lived in George. He was wearing a black shortie wetsuit.

SURFBOARD: The surfer was using a white buffer trifin surfboard manufactured by Reef. The board had yellow fins.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The sky was cloudless, and there was a moderate 15-knot north-northwesterly breeze (a Berg Wind).

MOON PHASE: Waxing Gibbous, 77% of the moon was illuminated. First quarter Moon on 25 May 1996.

SEA CONDITIONS: Unknown

ENVIRONMENT: According to Graham Heetem, Robin's father), there had been no sightings of dolphins in the area during the week preceding this incident. However, Köhne said that "lots of dolphins" had been seen in the area prior to the attack.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 100 metres, just behind the breaker line.

DEPTH OF WATER AT SITE: Unknown

TIME: 14h45

NARRATIVE: Donovan Köhne was in the water with five other surfers: His brother, 15-year-old Glenn, was training at Leentjiesklip for the South African schools surfing championships to be held at the weekend. The surfer was lying on his board, facing seawards, when, according to witnesses, the shark approached him from behind, clamping onto the surfer's left thigh and calf, and catching all three fins of the surfboard in its mouth. "I was about to take a wave when I felt something bump me," said Köhne. "I thought it was a dolphin." The surfer was flung side-to-side by the shark before being tossed into the air and onto the shark's back:

"I only realized what was happening when I landed on the shark's back and saw a big fin in front of me. I was terrified. I moved my board, wedging it between myself and the shark. Then I pushed the shark away. At the time I wasn't so much aware of the pain. I was just worried about my brother and mates who were also in the surf and screamed to them to get out."

Köhne's friend, Robin Hetem was in the water and saw Donovan tossed on the shark's back:

"I saw a huge fin. Donovan was screaming. I paused for a few seconds. I was shocked...I swam as fast as I could back to the beach. Donovan rode a wave and got back to the beach before I did."

INJURY: The surfer's lateral thigh and calf were lacerated.

DAMAGE TO EQUIPMENT: 1) The surfer's wetsuit was cut away by emergency medical personnel, but some of the damage to the wetsuit was made by the shark's teeth. 2) The surfboard was bitten by the shark, and two of the board's front fins were crushed. The third fin may have struck the shark's soft palate and stopped the shark from closing its mouth completely on the surfer's leg. A tooth fragment was recovered from the surfboard.

FIRST AID: Donovan remained calm. Fellow surfers from York High School helped to cut loose his wetsuit and a classmate, Sven Sieburger (also spelled Seaburger, Seaberger and Seeberger in various press accounts) helped him to stop the bleeding. Robin Heetem (19), who lives in Wilderness, ran home to get help.

TREATMENT: A George municipal ambulance arrived ten to 15 minutes after the incident and transported the surfer to Geneva Clinic in George where his injury was surgically repaired in a two-hour procedure. Sixty internal sutures (some of them to the bone) and 57 external staples were required. A fragment of shark tooth was also recovered from the surfer's leg.

SPECIES INVOLVED: The diameter of the bite impression measured approximately 25 centimetres. The surfers estimated the shark to be 2.5 metres total length. A tooth fragment was extracted from the surfboard by lifesaver Graham Heeten. The fragment, two centimeters in length and a half-centimetre in width with a straight serrated edge, was from a white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Andrew Gifford, Shark Research Institute