

ACTIVITY: Surfing

CASE: [GSAF 2002.05.31.b](#)

DATE: Friday May 31, 2002

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Pacific Ocean at Stinson Beach, Marin County, California, USA.

37.9°N, 122.6°W

NAME: Lee Fontan

DESCRIPTION: The surfer, a 24-year-old male from Bolinas, was wearing a new wetsuit. He is a landscaper by profession, and described by relatives as athletic and muscular, and an experienced surfer.

SURFBOARD: Fontan was using a six-foot yellow board.



BACKGROUND

WEATHER: At 13h56, San Francisco recorded scatter clouds and visibility of nine miles. The air temperature was 68°F [20°C], dew point 54°F [12.2°C], humidity 61%, sea level pressure 29.81 in [1009.2 hPa], and wind direction was WNW at 17.3 mph [27.8 km/h].

MOON PHASE: Last Quarter, June 2, 2002

SEA CONDITIONS: The surfers were enjoying a south swell, breaking right toward Bolinas Beach, making for excellent surfing.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 80 yards

DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE:

TIME: 14h00

NARRATIVE: The attack took place as a group of 12 to 15 surfers sat on their boards about 50 yards offshore from the Seadrift residential enclave, near the channel between Stinson Beach from Bolinas Lagoon. Fontan, who had been riding the waves for a couple of hours, was about 10 feet farther out to sea than anyone else, said John Gilbert, a surfer from Stinson Beach. Fontan remembers hearing a rustle of water between himself and the other surfers. Assuming somebody was paddling out to join him, he turned around. "Before I could even turn around to look if it was a person, bam! It had me. I guess it went from underneath up," he said. "It grabbed me . . . just like a freshwater bass will grab a frog," he said.

"We were out there kidding around, talking, waiting for the next wave. Then all of a sudden we heard a scream," said Gilbert. "I looked over and this guy was about three or four feet out of the water in the shark's mouth. The incident was surreal in its swiftness, more unbelievable than horrifying, according to Gilbert." "You see sharks on TV, where seals are attacked," he said. "It was just like that, straight up like a missile. The shark hit him and launched him out of the water."

Witnesses said the shark thrashed wildly as it clamped down. But the surfer fought back, striking the shark soundly at least once on the snout, according to witnesses. You could see [the shark's] teeth, its gums. Its eyes were shut. Its gills were wide open, like shutters. The

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whole dorsal fin on its back was out of the water," said Gilbert. When the shark crashed back into the ocean, it released the surfer and disappeared. Fontan got back on his board. "Because the board was in the way, he only got a little piece of my side and a little bit of my leg," Fontan said. "He bit me so clean, I thought I had a little road rash. Then I saw it; it was a big gash on my leg."

The other surfers brought Fontan to shore. It took at least 15 minutes for the rescuers to pull him to shore, noted Gilbert, adding, "It was surprising how long it took." Since the waves had died down temporarily, the ocean provided no help in carrying Fontan to the beach. Worse yet, Fontan was on a short surfboard, which meant much of his body was in the water creating a drag.

INJURY: The surfer had an eight-inch gash in his left thigh; the leg was opened to the femur, and he had punctures below his ribs, on his arms and a shoulder.

DAMAGE TO SURFBOARD: The shark left a huge arching bite mark -- about 13 inches wide -- in the surfboard. On the bottom of the board, Fontan had affixed a locally popular "no sharks" decal depicting an open-jawed shark beneath a circle and a slash. "Obviously, the sticker didn't work," said his father. "Or maybe it made him mad."

FIRST AID: Once near the beach, Fontan's fellow surfers moved him onto a longboard, which they used as a stretcher to bring him ashore. Fontan was still alert and talking, said Gilbert. Fontan wanted to see what damage he had sustained. Fortunately, bleeding wasn't severe -- perhaps because he was wearing a wetsuit and the ocean was cold. The surfers, including Gilbert, used rash guards (which are often worn under wetsuits) and surfboard leashes to apply pressure to Fontan's leg and ribs.

Paramedics from the Stinson Beach Fire Department arrived soon after the attack was reported, followed by National Park Service lifeguards, Marin County Fire Department ambulance crews, the Marin County Sheriff's Department and security officers from the nearby Seadrift residential development.

TREATMENT: Fontan was taken by helicopter to Eden Hospital in Castro Valley, where he underwent 90 minutes of surgery to repair skin and deep tissue wounds to his left leg and left shoulder and arm. Dr. Scott Snyder, a trauma surgeon, said that Fontan remained in critical condition but that his injuries were not life-threatening. He said he found no tooth fragments inside the wounds but removed some white matter that will be tested.

SPECIES INVOLVED: The incident involved a 12- to 14-foot white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*. Most likely, the shark mistook Fontan, who was wearing a wetsuit, for a seal or sea lion, said John McCosker, senior scientist at the California Academy of Sciences, in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. "It surprises me there are not more (attacks)," he said. "I would not be surprised to know that there are sharks swimming along Stinson Beach all summer long."

SOURCE: Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle - pfimrite@sfchronicle.com.