

ACTIVITY: Sea Disaster

CASE: GSAF 1918.11.00.a

DATE: November 1918

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Caribbean Sea on the Mouchoir Banks, sixty miles north of San Domingo and about fifty miles east-southeast from Grand Turk.

20° 57N, 70°42W

BACKGROUND

SEA CONDITIONS: “The sea was fairly smooth”. Mean water temperatures on the Mouchoir Banks in November ranges from 76° to 78°F.

TIME: Early morning



NARRATIVE: The steamer *Una*, chartered by the Clyde Steamship Company, was on her way from a port in San Domingo to Grand Turk, Turks and Caicos Islands, British West Indies when she ran aground on a rock. The bow of the steamer was smashed in and aground on the rock, while the rest of the vessel remained afloat but was filling fast.

“In addition to the regular crew, the steamer carried about 75 colored laborers from Grand Turk who worked in the cargo and were now homeward bound. The officers and crew saved themselves in lifeboats, but as there were not sufficient lifeboats for the addition 75 laborers, the latter had to save themselves on floats; some of these floats were regular life-floats, but others were hastily made out of hatch-covers and other wood which happened to be handy.”

In less than a hour, the first sharks appeared. “Some of the floats were overloaded; they tipped and rocked about, and here and there a man fell overboard; in no time the sharks were at them and tore them to pieces; after a while the sharks got even bolder and attacked the men on the rafts. The sharks tried to knock them off with their powerful tails; they made a rush for one raft or another and through their own momentum got their heads over the edge of the rafts, grabbing here and there a man by arm or leg and dragging him off. Some of these floats tipped, when the shark-heads were resting on the edge, to such an angle that the men could not hold on any longer and slid into the water, where they were torn to pieces within a few seconds. Some of the sharks swam under the rafts and tried to lift them out of the water with their backs, and they often succeeded, dumping all hands overboard. The men had no weapon except a few oars, and these soon broke or were torn from their hands. The utter helplessness of the men and the gruesome sight rendered some of the men completely crazy so that they jumped overboard right into the jaws of the sharks.”

SPECIES INVOLVED: The incident involved tiger sharks, *Galeocerdo cuvier*, “from eight to sixteen feet in length”.

SOURCES: Captain Young in Shark! Shark! pages 199-200. Young gives his source as Captain Ernst Schuetz, of Nassau, Bahamas; Victor M. Coppleson (1958), page 194, and Victor M. Coppleson (1962), page 210