

ACTIVITY: Treading water

CASE: [GSAF 1946.02.16](#) / SA-087

DATE: Saturday February 16, 1946

LOCATION: The accident took place in the Indian Ocean at South Beach, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

29°51,5'S, 31°02,6'E

NAME: Ernest Tomson

DESCRIPTION: Tomson, a 21-year-old male, was 1,78 metres tall and weighed 74 kilograms. He wore the costume of the Durban Surf Life-saving Club: a black costume with red trim. Tomson was a sprint swimming champion and held the 100-yard and 880-yard titles in Natal; he had been chosen to represent the province in the upcoming South African Championships.

SURFBOARD: This was a small hand-held wooden paddle of natural wood and dark brown in colour. It was designed to aid in propelling the body-surfer down a wave.



Ernest Tomson

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: Durban meteorological station recorded temperatures of 18° to 26°C, and no rain. At 08h30 there was 2/8 cloud cover and no wind, at 15h00 there was 7/8 cloud cover and a light five-knot southerly breeze.

MOON PHASE: Full Moon, February 16, 1946

SEA CONDITIONS: The sea was calm but a swell was pushing. The tide, a spring high tide, was full and "it was an ideal day for body-surfing," said the press. A channel was present and the water was discoloured.

ENVIRONMENT: Daga salmon up to 19 kilograms in weight were being landed at South Pier, Durban.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 50 metres

DEPTH: Three metres

TIME: 16h00

NARRATIVE: There were many people in the water at the time of the incident. Tomson was swimming seaward with his board in his right hand. Two swimmers were three metres behind him. He was treading water shorewards of the old pylon which was about 150 metres from the North Pier. Suddenly he felt something come shooting underneath him and then the shark grabbed his right upper arm. The speed and force of the attack lifted both Tomson and the shark out of the water. "My right arm was flung out and it seemed as if it had been torn from its socket," said Tomson, "For a moment (the shark) held my arm then tore loose, taking the greater part of my muscle with it. Then it jumped clear of the water and made out to sea". The 'surfboard' was hurled some metres away but Tomson, momentarily stunned, turned on his back and started kicking for shore. Brian Viljoen, a volunteer life-saver, swam to the injured man and helped him stay afloat. Another life-saver, Des Collopy, swam out to the two men and the victim was taken to the beach.

Dr and Mrs Cecil Stanley Jones were on the 15th floor of Fairhaven Flats and witnessed the

attack. In February 1946 Dr Jones worked as an anesthesiologist at Addington Hospital; he telephoned the hospital casualty department to alert them that a shark attack victim would be arriving and then sped over to the hospital.

INJURY: Tomson's right arm was badly lacerated and the biceps muscle was removed to the bone.

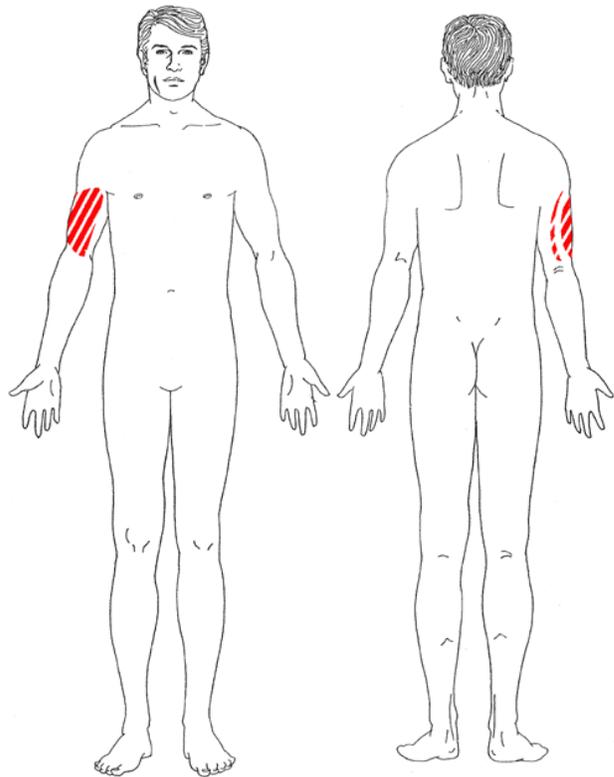
FIRST AID: Tomson was carried on to the beach "in a state of collapse but still conscious". Apparently little first aid was given because he was taken on a stretcher to the life-savers' ambulance and transported to Addington Hospital, arriving there within ten minutes of the attack.

TREATMENT: On admission to the hospital, Tomson's arm was immersed in ice. He required four units of blood before undergoing surgical repair and spent six weeks in the hospital. Some time later he went to San Francisco for plastic surgery and bone grafts.

SPECIES INVOLVED: Not identified. According to witnesses, the shark was "the size of a small man".

COMMENT: Bathing was banned at once. The Garrison Surf Life Saving Club offered a cash prize of £5 for the largest shark caught off a Durban beach the next day. A crowd of a thousand watched as 50 anglers competed and canoe floats, lent by the Pirates Surf Life-saving Club, were used to ferry baited hooks beyond the surf. The winner was Stan Daniel who landed a 19,5-kilogram "blackfin shark", *Carcharhinus limbatus* or *C. brevipinna*, off North Beach at 16h30.

Ernest Tomson's son, Shaun, became one of the world's legendary surfers and is a board member of the Surfrider Foundation. In 1977, he won the ISP World Championship and In 2002, Shaun Tompson received the Surf Industry Manufacturer Association's Environmentalist of the Year Award for his environmental efforts.



SOURCES: Interviews with Sonny Tompson (Ernest Tompson's brother), Des Collopy and Jimmy Warren by Marie Levine; Natal Mercury, February 17 & 18, 1946; Star, January 2, 1949.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Marie Levine

FOURTH CASE IN MONTH 18 FEB 1946

SWIMMER BITTEN BY SHARK

THE young Natal swimmer, Ernest Tomson (22), youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. S. Tomson, of Vernon Road, Durban, was bitten by a shark while bathing at the South Beach late on Saturday afternoon.

He was the fourth bather to be injured by a shark in a month.

Tomson was rescued by fellow life-savers and within 10 minutes of the attack was admitted to Addington Hospital. He was given an immediate transfusion of about four pints of blood.

The doctor attributed the quick transference to hospital and the countering of shock with new blood as the main factors which saved Tomson's life. "It was a very severe bite and he lost a great deal of blood," said the doctor. "Fortunately we had a most efficient blood transfusion service at our disposal."

FAIR CONDITION

Tomson's condition yesterday was fair and he was able to see many of his relatives and friends. He told a representative of "The Natal Mercury" yesterday morning that he was treading water shorewards of the old pylon, which is about 150 yards to the right of the pier, when he was attacked. At the time he was waiting for a wave to surf in.

"I felt something come up from below," said Tomson. "I thought my friends, whom I knew were swimming nearby, were up to their usual pranks and trying to scare me. Suddenly the upper portion of my right arm was seized in a vicious grip. I then

saw the shark—it was the size of a large man.

"For a moment it held my arm, then tore loose taking the greater part of my muscle with it. It then jumped clear of the water and made out to sea."

Tomson said he cried out after being momentarily stunned. He managed to turn on to his back and wave his left arm for assistance. His friends in the vicinity and life-savers swimming near the end of the pier went to his help.

Bryan Biljoen, a volunteer life-saver, was near Tomson when the shark struck. He swam to Tomson and held him up until a life-saver came with a line. Tomson lost a lot of blood which discoloured the water for some distance around him, but he was still conscious when carried to the beach. A stretcher was ready and he was quickly transferred to the life-saver's ambulance which was waiting to take him to hospital.

ORDERED FROM WATER

All swimmers were ordered to leave the water when the shark warning was given.

Tomson represented Natal at the recent South African Swimming Championships and came third in the 220 yards event. He is the holder of the 100 yards Natal title and has shown consistently good form this season. He has been a member of the Durban Surf Life-Saving Club for about seven years. He served in the South African Air Force during the war.

18 FEB 1946

43lb. Shark Sole Anglers' "Blitz"

ONE small black-fin shark weighing 43lb. was the net result of a "blitz" on sharks by 50 rods at Durban North Beach yesterday.

Following the incident on Saturday when Mr. E. Thomson was bitten while swimming off the South Beach and urged on by the promise of the Indian Surf Life-Saving Club of £5 for the biggest shark of the day, fishermen gathered on the beach from six in the morning.

The weather was kind to the shark. The water was dirty inshore. A strong backwash and a tide set towards the Umgeni mouth tangled lines and made the task of the anglers doubly difficult.

Canoe-floats loaned by the Pirates Surf Life-Saving Club and the Neptune Surf Life-Saving Club were used to ferry baited hooks out beyond the surf, the paddlers taking them out as far as the anglers wished. Sometimes the canoe would be 600 yards from shore.

Later in the day the surf made this too difficult and Indian life-savers swam from the shore to where the canoes waited just beyond the breakers. Now and then they got caught in the backwash and had a tussle to get back, one or two narrowly escaping being "rescued."

NO "BITES"

Hardly anybody had a "bite" all day.

Warned by the Tomson affair and in view of the dirty water inshore, the Indian Club's captain forbade bathing on the Coloured Beach where the fishing was going on.

Sorts of bait was used—scraps of pork and fish. The prizewinner used a 4lb.

Durban clubs were... Mr. J. Taylor, the... of the Natal Coast... was among the... Mr. T. Honeysett, the S.A.R. Cup for the... caught last year,

when he landed an 800lb. brute in October, was also there.

A large crowd wandered up and down the Beach and collected in clusters whenever an angler reeled in his line to rebait. There was a crowd of 1,000 or more when, at 4.30 p.m., Mr. Stan Daniel (of Montclair) got a bite and began to play his shark. There was a short fight, but the 43lb. black-fin was easily pulled in.

"This is the type that does the damage," Mr. Taylor told a representative of "The Natal Mercury." "It is this size and type of shark which takes a snatch at a person in the surf. It is not large enough to take a limb but it is small enough to move in the discoloured water inshore undetected. The type grows to 400lb. or 500lb., when they become man-eaters. Then they leave no trace—they take everything."

WHITE LIMBS

"They are attracted by things moving in the water—particularly white limbs. Very likely it was the pale-skinned patch on the heel that attracted the shark which bit the Indian life-saver Muderay recently in the foot."

E. B. Singh, captain of the Indian Surf Life-Saving Club, presenting the prize, said that Mr. Daniel had lifted a fear from the life-savers' hearts. He had also proved that the damage was being done by a shark and not by barracouda or big salmon.

The Indian Surf Life-Saving Club, which was formed in 1923, has 20 active regular members and a record of 2,000 lives saved on Durban's beach for Coloured people.

(S.A.P.A.)

~~18 FEB~~ 1946

SHARK VICTIM IMPROVING

At eleven o'clock last night it was reported that the condition of Ernest Tomson, who was bitten by a shark off the Durban South Beach on Saturday, was satisfactory. This report indicates a distinct improvement in the condition of Mr. Tomson and, in the words of the hospital authorities, can be considered encouraging.

28 MAR 1946

HE CAME UP
SMILING

SOCCE



ERNEST TOMSON, the well known Natal swimmer who was bitten by a shark off the Durban South Beach on February 18, has made good progress in Addington Hospital. Here he is seen talking to Norman Crown (right), the Transvaal and South African sprint champion, who is to make an attempt on the national 100 yards record at the Queens on Saturday night. Tomson was in good spirits when this photograph was taken yesterday. If a skin graft to his arm has taken effect he may be allowed to leave hospital to-day. Tomson says that it is unlikely that he will swim competitively again but that he will take up coaching juniors. His ambition at the moment is to attend the Durban Beach Baths on Saturday night to see Donald Johnston, Ian Tirrell and Norman Crown attempt to break South African records.

30 MAR 1948

SWIMMER'S OWN

STORY OF SHARK ATTACK

*He
back
11/2/48*
I Was Lifted
Clear From
The Water

In this article Ernest Tomson, Natal's 220 yards swimming champion, who is also a Durban lifesaver, tells the story of the attack made on him last month by a large shark at the South Beach.

He is one of the few South Africans to escape a shark attack with his life, although he was seriously injured and in grave danger for some time. He is now recovering from his injuries at Addington Hospital and may soon be discharged.



ERNEST TOMSON

By Ernest Tomson

IT was an ideal day for surfing—and for sharks. The tide was running full and a bunch of us were about a hundred yards out, waiting for slides.

A beauty came up and I caught it with my surfboard. The others missed and I came in alone right through the surf to the water's edge. It was getting late, but I decided to go in again for one more slide. I began swimming out with my board in my right hand. About 10 yards behind me were two other swimmers.

Suddenly, I felt something come shooting underneath me. For a moment I thought it was a friend trying to catch my leg.

And then I felt my shoulder in a vicious grip. The terrific speed at which the shark was travelling lifted me bodily from the water. My right arm was flung out and it seemed as if it had been torn from its socket. The surfboard was hurled some yards away.

Then I saw the shark leap out of the water. It was about the size of a man.

Stricken

I was absolutely panicked and shouting madly. I was worried about my arm and leg.

shore and a terrible feeling of loneliness came over me. I turned over on my back, put up my left arm and started kicking back for the shore. It seemed miles away.

Looking shoreward, I saw one of the swimmers coming back for me. It was Brian Billoen, who held me up and gave me encouragement until the professional life-saver, Wally Power, came out with a life line.

Still Conscious

By this time I was weak, but still very conscious. The waves were very big near the shore and as they broke we were swamped. By this time I had lost a great deal of blood and was finding it difficult to breathe.

I was then brought to the beach by the lifesavers who had a stretcher ready. They rushed me to the ambulance and I remember telling them to hurry as I thought I would not live to see another day.

The lifesavers were really magnificent and to them I owe my life. Such was their swiftness and coolness that I reached hospital in 10 minutes.

The big lift in the hospital would not work so the lifesavers ran me up two flights of stairs. The hospital staff was ready and I had immediate blood transfusions and my arm was packed in ice.

While waiting for the anaesthetic a young nurse kept pressing in the ice to keep my arm cool from my shoulder to the hand.

Father's promise fulfilled to son, victim of shark attack

8 JUN 1949

WHEN three years ago a Natal swimming champion, Ernest Tomson, had his career tragically cut short as the result of a shark attack off the South Beach, his father, Mr. S. Tomson, promised him: "If it is humanly possible, we'll have you fixed up again. We'll spare nothing."

This afternoon, Mr. Tomson will see that promise fulfilled when he greets Ernest at Palmietfontein Airport, for his son is due to return from the United States after a long course of medical treatment, and his wounds have healed.

But Ernest will greet a severely injured father. Mr. Tomson was involved in a car accident while travelling to Johannesburg, and as a result had to have 13 stitches in his head. He telephoned his friends in Durban last night telling them of the accident and said: "I'm determined to meet Ernest.

Don't worry about me."

Mr. Tomson's car was wrecked in the accident. He was taken to a Ladysmith Hospital and given medical treatment. He persuaded the doctor treating him that he was "all right," and resumed his journey to Johannesburg by train.

Ernest was Natal 220 yards swimming champion. Shortly after winning his title he was attacked by a shark when surfing with a number of his life-saver friends.

He subsequently described the attack: "I felt my shoulder in a vicious grip. The terrific speed at which the shark was travelling

lifted me bodily from the water. My right arm was flung out and seemed as if it had been torn from its socket"

After spending months in Addington Hospital, Ernest went overseas to see the famous London surgeon, Sir Harold Gilles. Later he went to the United States and spent some months in a hospital at San Francisco. He was visited in hospital by June Fulton, the South African girl who recently returned from Hollywood.

Ernest, who is 24 now, served in the South African Air Force as an air gunner during the war.

Swimmer, mauled by shark, returns healed

ERNEST TOMSON, 26-year-old former Natal swimming champion, is back in Durban, bronzed and fit, after a long course of treatment in the United States to his arm, which was mauled severely by a shark off the South Beach three years ago. His arm is now healed and he expects to be able to use his right hand in six months to a year's time.

The accident happened shortly after he won the Natal 220 yards swimming title. He was attacked by a shark which ripped the whole bicep muscle out of his right arm to the bone.

He spent months in hospital but his right hand remained paralysed and stiff in spite of operations. He left the Union last July for Britain where he saw leading doctors, who advised him to go to Dr. Sterling Bunnell, of San Francisco.

Ernest said to-day: "He is probably the leading handsetter in the world. People go to him from all parts of the world."

Ernest went into hospital for six weeks last September for the first operation. He underwent a series of operations and treatments before flying to the Union last week.

In between operations he toured and saw life in the United States. He said:

"I think life in the States is wonderful. The people are so casual. The girls are attractive,

full of life and good company."

Ernest added that both salaries and cost of living were high. "Everyone has a car and people spend their lives in debt because they go in for the hire-purchase system. Food is expensive. You don't pay a couvert charge to get into a night club, but a meal costs you £5.

SERVANT AT £31 MONTH

"I stayed with a family to whom I had an introduction. They had never met me, but they treated me like a son. They paid a Negro woman £31 a month and in addition she had a room in the house and the same meals as ourselves."

Ernest met June Fulton, the South African who won a film contract in Hollywood. She took him round the studios and he saw many of the great "stars."

He went bathing at Honolulu.

He said, "Swimming conditions there are like ours--except they don't have sharks."

Ernie Tomson, Dad – by Shaun Tomson

My dad didn't like to talk about the shark attack. He wouldn't directly evade the issue but he'd skirt around its edges with his own brand of humor. "The shark died of blood poisoning" or "I don't know who got the bigger shock, me or the shark." My mom said he experienced terrible nightmares, but we children never saw them. He was always smiling, totally un-selfconscious of the terrible scars the black fin's teeth had left on his arm. He could find humor in any situation.

Champion Who Lost Use Of Arm Swims Again

(Sunday Tribune Correspondent)

PRETORIA, Saturday.
ERNEST "CEONY" TOMSON, African swimming champion, who lost the power of his right arm after a battle with a shark in the surf off Durban in March, 1946, is swimming again. Modern surgery has restored the full use of the arm.

Tomson, who was told to choose between his hand and his life after the accident, saved enough money and went to America in 1948 to see whether he could not regain the use of his arm, which had gone stiff. He was determined to swim again.

STUDY OF HANDS

He journeyed to San Francisco, where he placed himself in the care of Dr. Sterling Bunnell, a renowned surgeon who had made a special study of hands. Tomson's main worry was that he would not regain the use of his muscles.

He spent a year in the United States, during which time he had five major and several minor operations to his arm.

Tomson, who is now 26, returned to South Africa recently. His first thought was to see whether he could swim again. He could, and quite as well as before his accident.

*Sunday Tribune
19 February 1950*

The attack happened in 1946, shortly after he had returned from the Second World War. He had been a tail gunner in American B25 Marauders flying for the SAAF beating off fighters with his twin 50-caliber Brownings and dropping 1,000-pound bombs on the Italians and Germans. After the attack he'd traveled to San Francisco for extensive surgery to attempt to regain the use of his right arm and had to undergo a series of skin grafts from his stomach. He'd tell us with a smile that the scars on his stomach were from ack-ack, anti-aircraft fire.

After the surgery he travelled to Hawaii to recuperate. He stayed in the Royal Hawaiian Hotel and befriended the Kahanamoku clan – Duke had been his hero as a young boy and Dad fell in love with the Hawaiian culture and lifestyle. We were the only house in South Africa where shoes had to be left outside the front door. His love for Hawaii rubbed off on me and Duke became my hero as well. My barmitzvah present wasn't the sheaf of stock certificates my class mates received but a trip to Hawaii, to the island that he loved.

He found a smile in any situation in life. He gave my sister Tracy a pumpkin for a birthday present. He'd been telling her for weeks that he was going to buy her a pumpkin, and when she opened the beautifully wrapped box, there it was and she burst into tears.

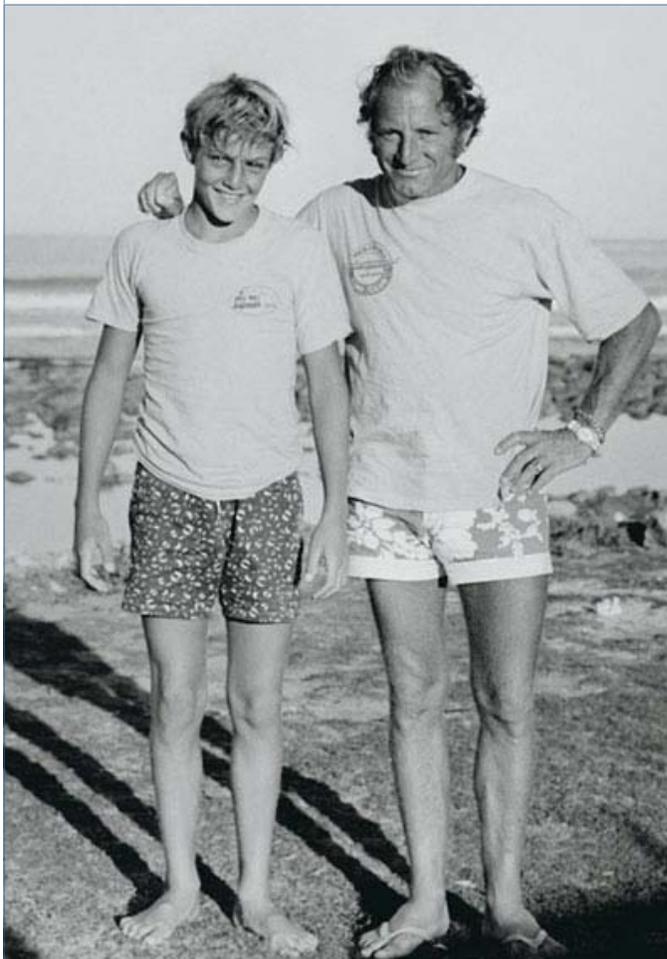
The longest-running pro contest in the world was the Gunston 500. My father and two friends, Max Wetteland and Ian McDonald conceived it in 1969, and he loved that event. First place for the Gunston was 500 rand, an enormous sum at the time, and I managed to make it all the way through to the semis when I was 13 years old. Four years later I was standing on the presentation stage with five other finalists in front of 20,000 people, as by then the Gunston had become one of the biggest sporting events in the country. My father was in the judges' tower about 20 yards away. He was a spotter, calling the colors of the surfers as they stood up to assist the judges in their scoring. He'd stand behind the judges and I knew he could see the scores so he had a good idea of who had won. It had been a close final and I looked questioningly up at him for some form of assurance. He shook his head and gave me the Roman Emperor's thumbs down. I was devastated until the results were announced a couple of minutes later – I'd won! He'd known all along but he wouldn't let a great opportunity for a practical joke to slip by. Winning was important but not that important – he put life in perspective for me.



*Daily News, February 16, 1946 -
Swimmer Attacked by Shark*

He'd just pulled through from the attack, after being in critical condition for some time. For years afterwards I'd have people come up to me on the beach: "You're Ernie's son. I helped pull your father in." He told me that when he got hit the shark lifted him straight out of the water and dropped him back in, and with blood all around, the fear really set in. He was riding a little wooden surfboard. He said he'd never seen the ocean clear so fast. Men were scrambling up the pilings, shredding themselves on the mussels, so people thought that there were multiple attacks. Only one swimmer had the courage to pull him in. He was rushed to Addington Hospital on the beachfront and the doctors packed his arm in ice. It was blazing hot summer so when the hospital ran out of ice all the beach hotels would bring in ice. He'd been one of the country's best swimmers and lifesavers and was training for the European games and Olympics. The shark bite ended his swimming career. He was 22 years old, a great athlete, and it had all come undone.

The attack in Dad's own words (see next page) . I read the article for the first time only recently, 55 years after it happened, when a filmmaker working on a film about shark attacks emailed it to me. It is possibly the first recorded instance of a shark attack on a surfer.



Ernie Tomson with some of his victory hardware from swimming events, late 1930's, just before the start of the Second World War

He had a deep love of the ocean and the beach life. One of my earliest memories are of the beach, going for a tiger tim. He'd talk in rhyming slang. The beach boys, like the Cockneys had their own language. A swim was a tiger, money was tom funny. The shark never kept him away from the water and he never kept us away.

I really miss him every day. The life force glowed from him like a fire. I got a phone call while competing in Australia that he was gone. No warning, just my mom on the other end saying how sorry she was.

May 1970, Buffalo Bay, at the conclusion of the trials for the South African team to compete at the World Contest in Australia. I was 14 and he was 47. I had just qualified as the #1 seed and he was a very proud Dad.

DURBAN SWIMMER'S OWN
STORY OF SHARK ATTACK

I Was Lifted Clear From The Water

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By Ernest
Tomson

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A beauty came up and I caught it with my surfboard. The others missed and I came in alone right through the surf to the water's edge. It was getting late, but I decided to go in again for one more slide. I began swimming out with my board in my right hand. About 10 yards behind me were two other swimmers.

Suddenly, I felt something come shooting underneath me. For a moment I thought it was a friend trying to catch my leg.

And then I felt my shoulder in a vicious grip. The terrific speed at which the shark was travelling lifted me bodily from the water. My right arm was flung out and it seemed as if it had been torn from its socket. The surfboard was buried some yards away.

Then I saw the shark leap out of the water. It was about the size of a man.

Panic - Stricken

As first I was absolutely panic-stricken. I started shouting madly and kicked my legs. I was worried that it would attack again.

By this time my wound had left a long trail of blood which I thought would attract my attacker or other sharks in the vicinity, of which I am sure there were quite a few. I resigned myself to my fate.

The two swimmers behind me were swimming furiously for the

shore and a terrible feeling of loneliness came over me. I turned over on my back, put up my left arm and started kicking back for the shore. It seemed miles away.

Looking shoreward, I saw one of the swimmers coming back for me. It was Brian Biljoen, who held me up and gave me encouragement until the professional life-saver, Wally Power, came out with a life line.

Still Conscious

By this time I was weak, but still very conscious. The waves were very big near the shore and as they broke we were swamped. By this time I had lost a great deal of blood and was finding it difficult to breathe.

I was then brought to the beach by the lifesavers who had a stretcher ready. They rushed me to the ambulance and I remember telling them to hurry as I thought I would not live to see another day.

The lifesavers were really magnificent and to them I owe my life. Such was their swiftness and coolness that I reached hospital in 10 minutes.

The big lift in the hospital would not work so the lifesavers ran me up two flights of stairs. The hospital staff was ready and I had immediate blood transfusions and my arm was packed in ice.

While waiting for the anaesthetic to take effect a young nurse kept her hand immersed in the ice to stop the flow of blood from my arm. I was then wheeled to the theatre.

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