

ACTIVITY: Scuba diving
CASE: [GSAF 1972.10.14.b](#)
DATE: Saturday October 14, 1972
LOCATION: The attack took place at Cane Bay, St Croix, Virgin Islands.

NAME: Rodney Temple

BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: First Quarter, October 15, 1972

SEA CONDITIONS: The water temperature was about 80°F and underwater visibility was estimated to be 150 feet.

DEPTH AT WHICH ATTACK TOOK PLACE: 225-230 feet

NARRATIVE: Rod Temple and his dive buddy, Bret Gilliam, were about to abort the dive because a third diver was having difficulties and had started ascending. Two oceanic whitetip sharks approached from over the drop-off and passed between the two divers, forcing them to become separated and descend deeper. The two divers swam along the bottom, Rod trailing Bret, and sought the protection of an embankment. When Bret turned around to look, Rod was not in sight, but he heard a grunting and whining sound from a greater depth.

Bret Gilliam described the accident:

"I looked down and couldn't believe the turbulence and silt that was clouding the bottom below me. Temple's air bubbles were coming out of the turbulence and he was apparently moving deeper. I swam down the line of bubbles. Visibility in the murky water was about three feet and I bumped into him before I saw him. I put one arm on his harness and tried to pull us up the bank. I was aware of him screaming into his mouthpiece and alternate violent shocks and tugs at his leg areas. We were both being pulled deeper in what I assumed was a shark attack. His body was sustaining violent shocks, and twisting at irregular intervals. We were turned over after one, and it was then that I ran completely out of air. I held my breath and tried to turn to face Temple. I gave him signals that I was out of air. He gave no sign of recognition. I attempted to reach across his chest to the secondary air supply he was carrying and could not reach it as we were both upset again. I estimate that I had held my breath over a minute at that point. I realized that I was slowly blacking out and pulled his safety vest and dropped his weight belt. I gave one last pull and felt him torn away. I can remember thinking he was already dead before the last attack pulled him away. He was apparently lifeless, limp, and the screaming had stopped. He quite probably had exhausted his primary air supply and was unable to negotiate the switch to his alternate. At this point, he would mercifully have succumbed to unconsciousness due to anoxia. My gauge was reading 270 feet when I reached him several minutes before. I had no idea of our present depth; approximately 300 feet. I pulled my safety vest, put my head back, exhaling and starting for the surface."

INJURY: Fatal. Rod Temple's body was not recovered. Bret Gilliam suffered decompression sickness.



Cane Bay, St. Croix

SPECIES: Oceanic whitetip sharks.

SOURCES: Virgin Islands Daily News, October 18, 1972; Bret Gilliam; Pete Thomas, Los Angeles Times, November 20, 1996

South African Man Dies In Shark Attack

By The Associated Press
CHRISTIANSTED -- A Tanzania, South Africa, man has been killed by two sharks off the coast of St. Croix.

The victim, identified as Rodney Temple, 23, who has lived in St. Croix two years, was attacked Saturday by the sharks at a depth thought to be 300 feet in the Caribbean Sea. The death was witnessed by two friends Brett Gilliam, 21, and Robby McIlvaine, both of St. Croix.

Efforts Monday failed to turn up any remains of the young man. The incident occurred about 250 yards off shore at Cane Bay.

Gilliam gave the following account late Monday of what happened:

All three swimmers started to descend the face of a vertical underwater cliff in that part of the Caribbean. Temple notified

him at the 195-foot level that he had decided to return to the surface. "As Temple and I turned towards the decompression line, we were separated by two large sharks of the white tip species. At the time we were about 10 feet apart."

The sharks forced them to descend. At the 280-foot depth they decided to approach a nearby fishpot line. He then looked for Temple but could not see him.

"I looked down and there was this tremendous turbulence in the water and I could see his air bubbles arising out of the disturbed area. I swam down and when I reached him his eyes were wide open and he was screaming into his mouthpiece. When I grabbed him there were tremendous sharks hitting his body and there was turning and

twisting and tugging."

Gilliam then returned to the surface when nothing more could be done.

Navy Ship Will Hold Open House

The Navy will add to the celebration of Veteran's Day with an open house before Monday's parades on St. Thomas and St. Croix.

The U.S.S. Spartanburg County will be at the West Indies Dock welcoming visitors to tour the ship Saturday and Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m.

Also displayed in Charlotte Amalie, Harbor will be the U.S.S. Hoist and the U.S.S. Elma

(See SHIP, Page 13)

Virgin Islands Daily News, Wednesday October 18, 1972, page 1

Here's the full story as it appeared in several books: included in Marty Snyderman book "GREAT SHARK ADVENTURES!" release date 1999 and "MARK OF THE SHARK" release date 2003, additionally published in Outside, Scuba Times, Rodale's Scuba Diving and many other magazines worldwide

SHARK ATTACK!

By Bret Gilliam

Be forewarned. There's no traces of my trademark dry humor to found in this story and there's no happy ending. It's probably as close as I've come to my trip to Valhalla. In October of 1972 it happened like this:

Rod Temple and Robbie McIlvaine were waiting for me when I drove up to the beach at Cane Bay on St. Croix's north shore. This area of the Virgin Islands had some of the best wall diving in the eastern Caribbean and the drop off was an easy swim from shore eliminating a long boat ride from Christiansted. We unloaded our gear and began to dress under the shade of the palms while a dozen or so tourists watched with interest. Diving was still not an every day sport for most people and the double tanks and underwater camera equipment held a certain fascination.

We were setting off to recover some samples from a collecting experiment we have placed on the wall for a local marine science lab. Six days before we had positioned our large support float right over the drop off with the research vessel and carefully loaded our sediment traps, nets and lines so they'd be ready for positioning in various locations in the shallow patch reef and the deep wall. Today we planned to inspect one project at 210 feet and shoot some photography of the area. Rod transferred the dive profile and decompression information to his slate as Robbie and I rounded up the remainder of the equipment and walked into the warm ocean to begin our leisurely surface swim to the float station about 300 yards offshore.

We'd done Cane Bay hundreds of times in the last two years both for work and for fun and this October morning was no different than scores of others as we snorkeled over the clear sand a few feet beneath our fins. As usual, Rod struck a livelier pace and forged on ahead while we wallowed in his wake towing the photo gear and another plexi-glass sand trap the lab wanted set in the chute that spilled over the wall.

Reaching the float, Robbie retrieved the snap swivels that would anchor the trap into our rope grid strung on the wall face. Rod reviewed the deco schedule, "Look, if we can get this thing set up and check out the project at 210 in fifteen minutes, we can save a lot of decompression. Can you do the photos in that time frame if I run the lines on the plexi trays?"

"Sure," I replied, "but don't go wandering off in case Robbie needs help getting snapped in with the trap. That thing's a ***** to swim with."

"No problem," Rod smiled back. "I don't mind doing the heavy work for you lazy Yanks."

His British enthusiasm belied the fact that Robbie and I were about twice his size and strength although he was older and more experienced. We both gave him an "up yours" salute knowing full well that any heavy lifting always came our way while Rod handled the paperwork. As the time keeper and dive leader, he would keep track of our dive profile, work in progress, remaining air status, and then run the deco schedule.

He eased away from the float and begin to swim the short distance over the deep blue that marked the drop off. The visibility was great, over 125 feet horizontally and even better looking up and

down. A mild swell wrapped around the point and the sea was calm. Two of the Navy vessels that we worked with on submarine listening tests were just a few miles offshore and we could hear their acoustical sound generators pinging away as we descended.

Rod settled in on top of the wall at 100 feet and we joined up to check gauges before slipping over in a gentle glide to the first work station at 180 feet. Robbie re-arranged the open ends of the traps to aim in the west quadrant this week and I fired off photos to record the scene. Most of the scientists who contracted us didn't do much diving themselves and they insisted on reams of photography so they could get an accurate idea of conditions in the deep water zones they were studying.

Signaling that we were finished, Rod led us over the coral buttresses and came to rest next to the deep project. It had slid a bit deeper during the week so Robbie and I eased it back into position and hoped it would stay put this time. This occupied our attention for most of ten minutes when Rod excitedly tapped me on the shoulder to point out the approach of two oceanic white tip sharks. This was nothing new to us as we dove with sharks routinely but it was rare to see these open ocean species in so close to shore. They passed within about ten feet of us and I shot a few photos as they swam off to the east.

We finished up the required observations and Rod filled out the field logs on his slate. Right on schedule he indicated, we were going to get out with only about 20 minutes deco it looked like. Robbie started up first and pointed out the sharks again as they swam by him headed over the coral and down into the sand chute. I remember thinking how strange it was to see oceanic white

tips right here on the wall at Cane Bay. It was kind of like walking off your back porch and seeing an African lion when you expected an alley cat.

We'd had our fair share of nasty encounters with whitetips when we worked offshore. They frequently bit our equipment, the steel cables deployed from the research vessel, and even the shafts and propellers on occasion. We were convinced that they would bite us as well once they got going and never turned our backs on them without another diver riding shotgun. But these two didn't seem to pay us any attention and I turned to begin the ascent behind Robbie. Our plan called for Rod to be the last guy up. I rendezvoused with Robbie at about 175 just over a ledge and we both rested on the coral to wait for him to join us. He was late and Robbie fidgeted pointing to his pressure gauge not wanting to run low on air. I shrugged and gave him a "what am I supposed to do" look and we continued to wait. Suddenly Robbie dropped his extra gear and catapulted himself toward the wall pointing at a mass of bubble exhaust coming from the deeper water.

We both figured that Rod had some sort of air failure either at the manifold of his doubles or a regulator. Since my air consumption was lower, I decided to send Robbie up and I would go see if Rod needed help. As I descended in the bubble cloud, Robbie gave me an anxious OK sign and started up.

But when I reached Rod things were about as bad as they could get. One of the sharks had bitten him on the left thigh without provocation and blood was gushing in green clouds from the wound. I was horrified and couldn't believe my eyes. He was desperately trying to beat the 12 foot animal off his leg and keep from sinking deeper. I had no idea where the second shark was and lunged to grab his right shoulder harness strap to pull him up.

Almost simultaneously the second shark hit Rod in the same leg and bit him savagely. I could see Rod desperately gouging at the shark's eyes and gills as he grimly fought to beat off his attackers. With my free hand I blindly punched at the writhing torsos of the animals as they tore great hunks of

flesh from my friend in flashes of open jaws and vicious teeth. Locked in mortal combat, we both beat at the sharks in frantic panic. And then they suddenly let go. I dragged Rod up the sand chute, half walking and half swimming. Once clear of the silt I could see Robbie about 100 feet above us looking on in horror. He started down to us as I lifted Rod off the bottom and kicked with all my might toward the surface.

But in less than fifteen seconds the first shark returned and hit him again and began towing us both over the drop off. The attack had probably only lasted a minute at this point but Rod had lost a huge amount of blood and tissue and had gone limp in my grasp. I was still behind him clutching his right harness strap as the second larger shark hit him again on the opposite side down around the left calf. Like the other, this shark bit and hung on as we tumbled down the wall face.

We were dropping rapidly now completely out of control. My efforts to kick up were fruitless as the sharks continued to bite and tear at their victim, all the while dragging us deeper. I felt Rod move again to fend off another attack and my hopes soared upon realizing that he was still alive. I clung briefly to the edge of the drop off wall to arrest our rapid descent. The coral outcropping gave us some slight protection and for a moment the attacks stopped.

Both sharks retreated into the blue and I watched them circle our position from about ten feet away. To my horror I saw one shark swallow the remains of Rod's lower left leg right before my eyes. The other gulped a mouthful of flesh it had torn off. I tried to push Rod into the coral in an effort to shield him from another attack but there was nothing to afford any real shelter. As I turned away from the waiting predators, Rod and I came face to face for the first time during the attack. He shook his head weakly and tried to push me away. I grabbed for his waist harness for a new grip and felt my hand sink into his mutilated torso. There was no harness left to reach for. He had been disemboweled.

Shrieking into my mouthpiece in fury I pulled him from the coral and took off pumping for the surface with him clutched to my chest. Immediately the sharks were on us again. I felt the larger one actually force me to one side as it savagely sought to return to the wounds that gushed billows of dark blood into the ocean around us. Rod screamed for the last time as the second shark seized him by the mid-section and shook him. The blue water turned horribly turbid with bits of human tissue and blood. Once we were turned completely over and I felt Rod torn away from me.

I watched his lifeless body drift into the abyss with the sharks still hitting him. The attack had started around 200 feet. My depth gauge was pegged at 325 feet now but I knew we were far deeper than that. The grimness of my own situation forced itself on me through a fog of narcosis and exertion.

That's when I ran out of air. I think that subconsciously I almost decided to stay there and die. It seemed so totally hopeless and my strength was completely sapped. But I put my head back and put all my muscle into a wide steady power kick for the surface. I forced all thoughts to maintaining that kick cycle and willed myself upward.

After what seemed like an eternity I sneaked a look at my depth gauge: it was still pegged at 325 feet. I sucked hard on the regulator and got a bit of a breath. Not much, but it fueled my oxygen starved brain a bit longer and I prayed my legs would get me up shallow enough to get another breath before the effects of hypoxia shut my systems down forever.

There's really no way to describe what it's like to slowly starve the brain of oxygen in combination with adrenaline induced survival instincts. But I remember thinking if I could just concentrate on kicking I could make it. After a while the sense of urgency faded and I remember looking for the surface through a red haze that gradually closed down into a tunnel before I passed out. The panic

was gone and I went to sleep thinking "damn, I almost made it."

I woke up on the surface retching and expelling huge belches of expanding air. Apparently the small volume of air in the safety vest I wore had been enough to float me the final distance and save my life. But I still had to deal with an unknown amount of omitted decompression and the certainty that I was severely bent.

Swimming to shore as fast I could, I felt my legs going numb. By the time I reached the beach I could barely stand. A couple on their honeymoon waded out and dragged me up on the sand. I gasped out instructions to get the oxygen unit from our van and collapsed. In an incredible burst of good fortune, it turned out the wife was an ER nurse from Florida and understood the pathology of decompression sickness. They got a steady flow of oxygen into me and ran to call the diving emergency numbers that I directed her to on the dive clipboard.

I drifted away again into unconsciousness and was revived at the airport where a med-evac flight was waiting to fly me to Puerto Rico. But the Navy chamber was down and it was decided to take me to the only other functional facility up on the island's northwest corner nearly 200 miles farther away. But the flight crew was afraid I wouldn't make it when we ran low on oxygen shortly after passing San Juan. So they had the police stop traffic on the main divided highway and landed on the road where a waiting Coast Guard helicopter snatched me away to the hospital roof.

Two days later I was released but with residual numbness in my arms and legs, substantial hearing loss, and legal blindness in my right eye that persists to this day.

Robbie's last view of Rod and me was as we were dragged over the wall in a cloud of blood by the sharks. He never saw my free ascent and so reported us both killed when he got to shore. It was not until I called my dad from the hospital that he knew I had survived. A week later we had Rob's memorial service at the beach. I resumed diving the next day. His body was never recovered.

Aftermath: This attack in 1972 was widely reported and shark experts speculate that the oceanic whitetips may have been attracted and then stimulated by the low frequency sound in the water from the nearby submarine testing. The previous deepest depth that a diver survived a free ascent from was 180 feet. Gilliam was probably closer to 400 feet. He was cited for heroism by the Virgin Islands government for risking his own life to try to save his partner. In 1993, British television (BBC) produced a special on the incident as part of a series called "Dead Men's Tales".

Author notes: Bret Gilliam was professionally involved in the diving industry for 35 years and retired in 2006. Since beginning diving in 1958 he has logged over 17,000 dives. He can be contacted at bretgilliam@gwi.net

SOURCE: *Bret Gilliam posted this account on ScubaBoard.com on November 24, 2007, <http://www.scubaboard.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-27499.html>*