

ACTIVITY: Surfing

CASE: GSAF 1981.07.18 / SA-298

DATE: Saturday July 18, 1981

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Indian Ocean at Nahoon Reef, five kilometres northeast of the harbour entrance at East London, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

32°59,4'S, 27°57,1'E

NAME: Barry van der Helm

DESCRIPTION: The surfer, a 32-year-old male, is 1,7 metres tall and weighs 70 kilograms. He was clad in blue wetsuit pants and blue booties with black soles. A red plastic leash was attached to his right foot with a black velcro strap.

SURFBOARD: The board was a 1,78-metre white twinfin fibreglass board. The fins were black with yellow edges.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: It had been overcast earlier in the morning with intermittent sunshine but, at the time of the attack, the sky had cleared and there was a gentle offshore breeze. East London meteorological station recorded temperatures of 5,8° to 23°C and no rain.

MOON PHASE: Waning Gibbous, 98% of the Moon was illuminated. Full Moon, July 17, 1981.

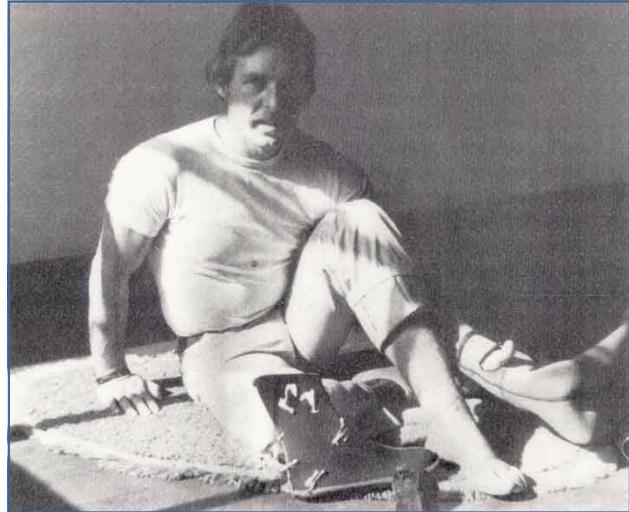
ENVIRONMENT: Nahoon lies on the west bank of the Nahoon River, five kilometres north of the entrance to East London Harbour. The most popular beach in East London, Nahoon is renowned throughout the South African surfing community for producing some spectacular waves and is the venue of many national surfing competitions. The surfer does not recall that anyone was fishing in the vicinity and he saw no dolphins, or any unusual fish or bird activity. Effluent from the Bats Cave Outfalls was present just south of Nahoon Reef.

SEA CONDITIONS: The water was unusually clear and warm for the area; sea temperature was 19°C and there was a one to two-metre swell. The incident took place four minutes before mean low tide.

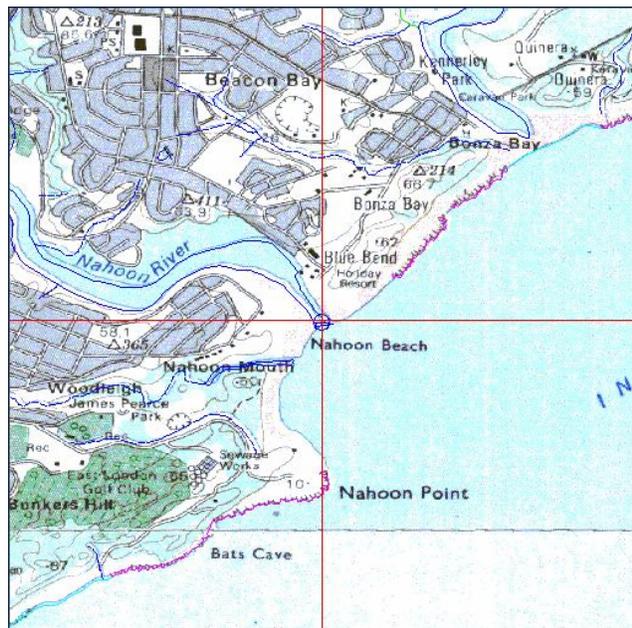
DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 100 metres.

DEPTH: Two metres

TIME: 10h15



Barry van der Helm



NARRATIVE: Barry van der Helm had been in the water barely 15 minutes; he had just kicked out of a wave and was thrusting himself on to his surfboard when his foot kicked an object. The surfer believes that the object may have been the shark and that it followed him as he paddled out to sea. Moments later, as the surfer was sitting on his board facing seaward, when he was bitten by the shark.

“Suddenly I felt a bite on my ankle and went underwater,” said Van der Helm. “When I opened my eyes I saw a 1,8 to two-metre shark with my foot in his mouth. I realised I had to do something quickly: I pulled my foot out of its mouth and, with the other foot, kicked it on the nose. The shark swam away and only then did I realise what had actually happened; I grabbed hold of my surfboard and, as there were about 20 surfers in the water, I shouted ‘shark’ to warn the others.” Barry paddled to shore with the assistance of some of the surfers.

INJURY: There were seven lacerations in the surfer's right foot.

EQUIPMENT DAMAGE: It is not known if Van der Helm's board was damaged but his wetsuit pants and boots were torn.

FIRST AID: The surfer was carried to a private car and taken to Frere Hospital in East London. He reached the hospital 15 minutes after he was bitten by the shark.

TREATMENT: Van der Helm's foot was bandaged at Frere Hospital and he was referred to his own doctor, Dr Filmer, for further treatment. The wounds required 22 stitches.

SPECIES INVOLVED: Robin Horn of the East London Aquarium examined the injuries and had the surfer sketch the shape of the shark's snout. Based on the wounds and the sketch, Horn suggested that the incident may have been a Zambesi shark, about 1,8 to two metres in length.

SOURCES: Interview with Barry van der Helm on December 11, 1986; Robin Horn, East London Aquarium; Zigzag Magazine, Vol. 6, No. 1, Dec/Feb 198, pages 15-16.

