

ACTIVITY: Spearfishing
CASE: GSAF 1983.06.22

DATE: June 22, 1983

LOCATION: The attack took place at Hole In The Wall, 18 miles from Sandy Point, Great Abaco Island, Bahamas.

NAME: Carl James Harth

DESCRIPTION: He was a 15-year-old male from Tavernier, Florida.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: Bright sun

SEA CONDITIONS: Clear water

DISTANCE FROM BOAT: 15 feet

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 500 yards

DEPTH OF WATER: 60 feet

TIME: 16h00



NARRATIVE: See press clipping on next page.

INJURY: Fatal. Thigh bitten

SPECIES: Not identified

Yelling 'shark' all he could do

Bahamas vacation becomes nightmare for Florida teen's family

By Jim Hardie
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

MIAMI—Harold L. Grant recalled the details in a subdued voice.

"C.J. yelled, 'Shark!' and that's all. His brother was five feet away and didn't see or feel anything. When I pulled C.J. out of the water, I could see the wound was large—at least 18 inches across from his thigh to his torso. He lived about an hour."

C.J., 15-year-old Carl James Harth of Tavernier, Fla., died late in the afternoon of June 22. The death certificate issued in Nassau, the Bahamas, read, "Cause of death: [shark] sea animal."

The Grants were on a vacation aboard their 23-foot sailboat Bubbles and had reached the southern tip of Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas when the tragedy occurred.

As they approached an area known as the Hole in the Wall, they were fascinated by the 30- to 40-foot cliffs nearby and the abrupt change in the color of the water.

"We had never seen anything like this so close to shore," said Grant, C.J.'s stepfather. "The dark blue of the ocean abruptly changed to green. We were about 500 yards offshore, and I would guess the water to be 60 feet deep. The color change was so drastic, it was definitely enticing, and both boys dived overboard."

IT WAS 4 p.m. on a bright, sunny day. There was no wind.

"We were drifting no more than one knot," Grant said. "The water was extremely clear."

Grant, wife Penny and 4-year-old daughter Michelle were in the cockpit. C.J. and brother Michael, 13, were in the water with spearguns.

The two boys were no more than 15 feet from the boat and scarcely an arm's length apart when C.J. yelled out.

"We didn't see anything—no fin, no shark, nothing," Grant said. "We just heard his yell. There was no great amount of blood in the water. He made it to the boat, and I pulled him aboard."

"He was my stepson, but I've had him since he was 3. He was my son."

GRANT'S BOAT is not equipped with a radio.

"It makes sense to have a radio, but it wouldn't have made any difference in this case," he said. "We put three towels in the wound, and I made a tourniquet to stop the bleeding."

He turned Bubbles 180 degrees and headed for two nearby boats.

"I didn't have a motor," he said. "There was no wind to speak of, and we were doing little more than drifting. I burned 10 flares and fired 15 rounds of ammunition to get the attention of the boaters. They came alongside. There was a registered nurse aboard one."

The Coast Guard was notified by radio, but told Grant it would need 2½ hours to reach the boat by helicopter.

"The nurse did all she could, but it was too late," Grant said.

THE GRANTS WERE 18 miles from the fishing village of Sandy Point. "It was a beat into the wind all the way. It took us eight hours to go 18 miles," Grant said.

At Sandy Point, a radio message was sent to the Bahamas Defense Force via Bahamas Air Sea Rescue. The defense force noted that the call was received at 9:30 p.m., about 4½ hours after C.J. had died and vessel P30 was dispatched.

"They arrived in the middle of the night, but had to lay offshore until daylight," Grant said.

C.J.'s body was taken aboard P30. Penny, Michelle and Michael went along. The three-hour trip south to Spanish Wells ended at 9 a.m. on June 23, and the group was flown to Nassau and then to Miami.

Three days later, Grant and two friends returned to Sandy Point and sailed Bubbles back to Key Largo.

"THE NATIVES MADE a point of our being in the ocean when the attack occurred," he said. "They make a distinction between the waters of the shoreline and the ocean. Although they had never had anything like this happen at Sandy Point, they do think the chances for a shark attack are greater in the summer."

C.J. had been a mate on a party boat out of Key Largo in the Florida Keys and had made two fishing trips to the Dry Tortugas. "He was skillful and knowledgeable about fishing," Grant said.

A subsequent shark attack occurred July 13, also at Great Abaco Island.

Eric Gijssendorffer, 13, of Boca Raton, Fla., was spearfishing with his family at Green Turtle Cay when he was bitten on the leg. He was flown by Coast Guard helicopter to a hospital in North Miami, where he was treated and released.

After the attack at Green Turtle Cay, Basil Kelly, president of the Bahamas National Trust, issued a caution to spearfishermen and asked various diving and conservation organizations to enforce safety regulations.

"An increasing number of sharks have been seen close to shore at the outsides [of islands facing the ocean]," Kelly said. "One reason may be an increasing number of young, inexperienced spearfishermen who leave fish bleeding in the water."

Kelly noted that sharks were coming close to boats as well as to shore.

GRANT SAID he used to be one of those people who thought the danger of shark attack was exaggerated. "That was my theme, talking about shark attacks was sensationalism to me," he admitted.

Veteran skippers who have cruised the Bahamas and the Keys agree these safety rules should be followed:

- Never be on a boat without a working radio.
- Avoid late-afternoon snorkeling and/or spearfishing.
- Avoid "trolling" a snorkeler behind a boat over a reef. This is a widespread practice in Florida and the Bahamas.

Grant, a schoolteacher and construction worker, has lived in the Keys for five years since moving from Illinois. He was asked about some of these precautions.

"As I said, the radio wouldn't have made a difference," he replied. "It was 4 o'clock but sunny with excellent visibility above and below the water."

Asked if there was any neglect involved, Grant said, "Yes, I neglected to stay home."