

ACTIVITY: Surfing

CASE: GSAF 1985.01.17 / SA-0333

DATE: Thursday 17 January 1985

LOCATION: The attack took place at Umbogintwini, 20 kilometres southwest of Durban on the KwaZulu-Natal coast. The beach did not have shark nets.

30°00,6'S, 30°56'E.

NAME: Bruce Eldridge

DESCRIPTION: The surfer, an 18-year-old male, is 1,70 metres tall and weighs 60 kilograms. Fair-haired and tanned, he was clad in a black swimming costume, but wore no jewelry and had no injuries before the incident. A transparent green leash was attached to his right leg with an orange-edged dark blue velcro strap. Eldridge has been surfing for 10 years and was the overall winner in the Southern Natal Surfing trials at Greenpoint the previous weekend.

SURFBOARD: The under-surface of the board, which was a 1,73-metre triffin, was blue with yellow and pink stripes.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The sky had been overcast earlier in the day and there had been a 14-knot moderate east-southeasterly breeze, but by 18h00 the sun was shining and the wind had dropped completely. Durban temperature was 25,2°C, humidity was 92% and barometric pressure was 1005,9 millibars.

MOON PHASE: Waning Crescent with 15% of the moon's visible disk illuminated. Last quarter Moon on 14 January 1985 at 01:27 (Universal Time + 2h).

SEA CONDITIONS: The surf temperature at Durban was 25°C and mean low tide was at 19h44. As the result of heavy rains on the day of the attack the Mbokodweni River was in spate, but there was little floating debris. Water visibility off the river mouth was zero, and at the attack site visibility was about a metre. An inshore rip current was moving north-to-south and, at times, out to sea. A sandbank had formed parallel to shore and the swell was two metres in height.

ENVIRONMENT: A pipeline from SA Tioxide discharged highly acidic effluent (pH<1) 1,6 kilometres offshore. (The effluent is predominantly sulphuric acid used to separate titanium oxide from the illmenite ore. The acid contains ferrous sulphate which precipitates out of solution when the effluent is mixed with seawater.) There were two fishermen in the area but it is not known what fish, if any were caught. No unusual fish or bird activity was noted by witnesses.

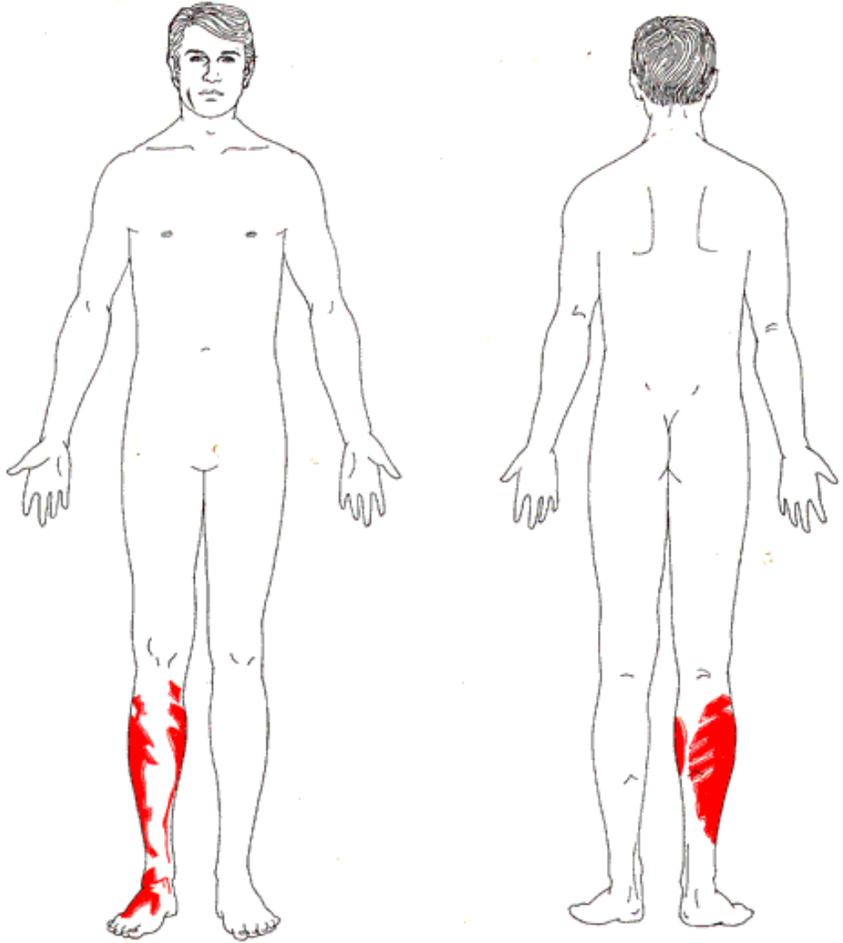
DISTANCE FROM SHORE: The incident took place between 100 and 150 metres from the beach.

DEPTH OF WATER: Two to three metres

TIME: 18h30 (Sunset was at 19h01)



NARRATIVE: Bruce Eldridge and two other surfers, Eric Robinson and Keith Lowess entered the sea about 400 metres south of the Mbokodweni River and surfed for an hour. Eldridge rode a wave inshore and was paddling back out to sea when the shark attacked, biting his lower right leg and causing the surfboard to rotate 360°. The surfer said he felt a force clamp on his lower leg and attempt to pull him vertically down into the water, but he resisted and kicked downwards. Robinson, who was 20 metres to the north, heard Eldridge shout and saw his surfboard “pulled down” into the water backwards. Then he saw the board resurface with the shark on top of the surfer's legs, shaking its head from side to side. The entire attack took place in less than ten seconds, after which all surfers caught a wave to shore.



INJURY: The surfer suffered major multiple lacerations. A large portion of tissue had been removed from the right calf; a major portion of the posterior compartment muscle bulk was missing and there was a laceration of the tibial nerve just below the division of the sciatic nerve in the upper part of the leg, and the distal end of this nerve was jagged. The posterior tibial vein was torn, but the popliteal artery appeared intact. Several tendons in the antero-lateral compartments were cut at the musculo-tendinous junctions and extensor tendons and digital nerves on the anterior aspect of the dorsum of the foot sustained multiple lacerations. There were multiple minor lacerations (individual tooth marks) on the antero-lateral aspect of the leg and the dorsum of the foot. X-rays of his right leg showed no bony abnormality.

DAMAGE TO EQUIPMENT: A section of the board was bitten off near the nose.

FIRST AID: Robinson and Lowes carried the injured surfer to a car park. The wound was wrapped in a towel, with a second towel used as a tourniquet to control excessive bleeding, and he was transported to Kingsway Clinic. He arrived at the clinic six or seven minutes after he left the beach.

On arrival at the clinic, they were directed to Addington Hospital. Unfortunately, the clinic was unable to render assistance and Addington Hospital was not alerted that a trauma patient was en route. It took an additional 15 to 20 minutes to reach Addington Hospital where Eldridge was admitted suffering from shock and blood loss.

TREATMENT: At Addington Hospital, C.P. Terreblanche, an orthopaedic surgeon, treated the surfer. Eldridge remained in the hospital from January 17 to February 17, 1985.

SPECIES INVOLVED: Two small tooth fragments were recovered from the wounds. The first was located in a large wound on the antero-lateral aspect of the proximal leg, and the second was found in the wound on the dorsum of the foot. The tooth fragments confirmed that the incident involved a white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*.

NOTE: Eric Robinson was awarded the Conspicuous Service Medal of the Red Cross for his efforts in rescuing Eldridge.

SOURCE: Interviews with Bruce Eldridge

CASE INVESTIGATORS: Marie Levine, Beulah Davis and Graeme Charter, Natal Sharks Board



Natal Mercury, December 20, 1985: "One of the entrants in this weekend's pro-surf classic is Bruce Eldridge, the South Coast surfer who almost lost a leg last January when attacked by a great white shark.

He spent yesterday on Amanzimtoti Beach testing out his new surfboard."

Photo courtesy Natal Mercury

© Marie Levine, 1988. All rights reserved. This report may not be abridged or reproduced in any form without written permission of the author.