

**ACTIVITY:** Spearfishing

**CASE:** GSAF 1987.01.28 / SA-355

**DATE:** Wednesday January 28, 1987

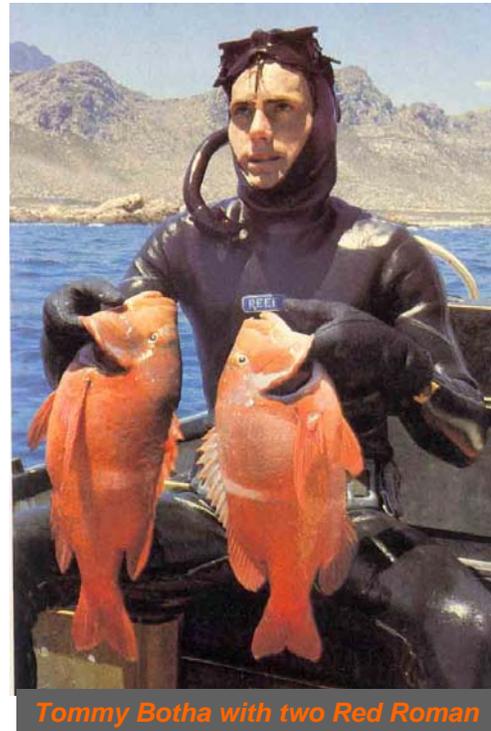
**LOCATION:** The incident took place in the Indian Ocean on an offshore reef near Eerste Rivier which is situated between Oyster Bay and the Storms River mouth off Tsitsikama and about 58 kilometres south of Cape St Francis in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.

34°05,5'S, 24°14,8'E

**NAME:** Tommy Botha

**DESCRIPTION:** The diver, a 30-year-old male, is 1,83 metres tall and weighs 90 kilograms. He wore a black full wetsuit, black mask, snorkel, swim fins, weight-belt and three-millimetre black gloves. He carried a dull-coloured dark blue speargun in his left hand and was trailing an orange-coloured float. There were no fish suspended from his float and he had no injuries before entering the sea. A former SA Navy diver, Botha was awarded Springbok colours for underwater hockey in 1977, and a year later for spearfishing. He has been South African Spearfishing Champion five times and competed internationally, winning a spearfishing title in Chile and two in the USA.

**BOAT:** The support boat was a 5,5-metre Budd-cat with a cream-coloured fibreglass hull.



Tommy Botha with two Red Roman

## BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** The sky was sunny and there was a light south-westerly breeze.

**MOON PHASE:** New Moon, January 29, 1987

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The sea was warm; water temperature was about 20°C. A two-metre swell was running but there was very little current. The incident occurred about 2,5 hours before mean high tide, the day before spring tide, and visibility ranged from six to ten metres.

**ENVIRONMENT:** There were many small fish in the area: bronze bream *Pachymetopon grande* and Roman were abundant. Botha observed a large red steenbras *Petrus rupestris* and had shot a 15,9-kilogram musselcracker *Sparidae* earlier in the dive. Two other divers were also in the water, one on each side of Botha; one diver was 15 metres from him and the other was 40 metres away. Both divers had small fish on their float lines. No seals were observed and the other divers never saw the shark.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** Half-kilometre

**DISTANCE FROM BOAT:** 100 metres

**DEPTH:** Just before the incident Botha had been diving in 15 metres of water. The incident took place near pinnacles which extend to within three metres of the surface.

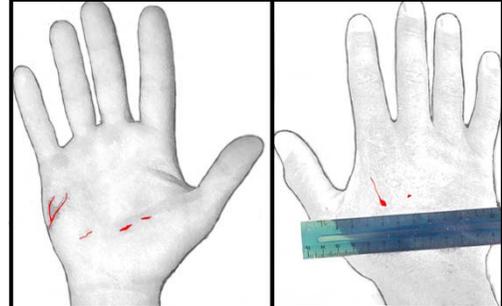
**TIME:** 13h00

**NARRATIVE:** Botha was resting on the surface with his hands hanging down into the water when he glanced down and saw the shark swimming up from the bottom directly at him.

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The shark was barely an arm's length away and, before he could react defensively, the shark took his right hand in its mouth. His hand was clamped in the corner of the shark's jaw as the shark swam in a half-circle on the surface carrying him through the water. The shark was too close for Botha to use the speargun which he still held in his left hand but he tugged his right hand until the shark released it. "I was scared when I pulled my hand out of the shark's mouth and saw all the blood," said Botha. "I kept my hand out of the water and screamed for the boat to pick me up." The diver did not see the shark after it released his hand.

**INJURY:** Botha sustained puncture wounds / incisions on his right hand: two on the dorsal surface and four on the palmar surface. The most severe injury was on the heel of his hand below his little finger.



**FIRST AID:** Botha's glove was not removed; a towel was wrapped around his hand and served as a pressure bandage. The divers boarded their boat and headed for shore. As the boat approached the slipway they realised that there were no cars in the vicinity and the nearest house was some distance away, so they went to a spot opposite a holiday house where friends were staying. One of the divers swam through the surf, informed the friends of the accident and, when the boat returned to the slipway, a car was waiting to take the diver to the hospital.

**TREATMENT:** Botha reached the hospital in Kareedouw, 15 kilometres from the slipway, 40 minutes after the attack. At the hospital Dr Baard closed the wounds on the diver's hand with 20 sutures. Botha was discharged after treatment; he was not kept at the hospital overnight.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** The diver never saw the entire shark but, based on the size of its head, he estimated that it was between 2,5 and three metres in length. Initially he thought the incident involved a shortfin mako shark because its dorsal surface was blue, but later revised his opinion and believed it was a white shark. No photographs of the wounds were taken prior to surgery; it is not possible to determine from the post-surgical photographs if the wounds were incisions created by the serrated teeth of a white shark, or punctures made by pronged teeth of a mako shark.

**COMMENT:** It is probable that this incident was motivated by curiosity. Exploratory/play behaviour often consists of activities associated with foraging, fighting, flight, courtship or mating but it is less intense than the activity which it resembles. It is when engaging in this behaviour that an animal learns. The ability to learn is greatest in the most intelligent animals and it is these animals which continue to investigate their environment even after they reach adulthood. One of the most significant aspects of this behaviour is that discoveries can be made by accident which can benefit the animal. In addition to this case there have been other instances in which a shark has held a human and pushed or dragged him/her through the water, and in these instances inhibitions such as are found in exploratory behaviour may have been operating; although the sharks were clearly capable of inflicting more serious damage or death, they did not.