

**ACTIVITY:** Surfing

**CASE:** GSAF 1989.08.22 / SA-373

**DATE:** Tuesday August 22, 1989

**LOCATION:** The attack took place in the Indian Ocean off "The Point" in Mossel Bay on the western side of the Cape St Blaize lighthouse, Western Cape Province, South Africa.

34°11,2', 22°09,7'E



**NAME:** Niko von Broembsen

**DESCRIPTION:** The surfer, a blond and tanned 21-year-old male, is 1,73 metres tall and weighs 62 kilograms. He was clad in a black five-millimetre double-nylon and neoprene short-sleeved, full-length wetsuit with yellow panels on the shins. He wore no jewelry but had a pale grey wetsuit boot on his right foot and a translucent yellow leash attached to his right ankle. The surfer's feet had been nicked on the rocks and may have been bleeding slightly.

**SURFBOARD:** The board, a 1,88-metre triffin, has a white and faded pink upper-surface, a white under-surface, and three white fins.

## BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** It was a warm sunny spring morning. Air temperature was about 18°C. It was still and calm inshore, but out where the waves were breaking there was a gentle southwesterly breeze.

**MOON PHASE:** Waning Gibbous with 65% of the moon illuminated. Last Quarter, August 23, 1989.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** Water visibility was estimated to be about two metres and wave height was one to three metres. Mean high tide was at 06h35.

**ENVIRONMENT:** Local fishermen reported that there were several attacks on ski-boats in the area in the weeks before this attack. The surfer commented on a strong fishy smell at The Point, which he assumed had come from a fish factory on the bay. "I have noticed this smell on previous trips; on those occasions entrails, heads, fins and bones of processed fish floated in the current and I often saw small seals actively feeding on it." The area usually teems with seals, but the surfers saw none at all that morning. Moments before the attack von Broembsen remarked to Harding that he was uneasy. "I had a bad feeling," he said, "and I wasn't joking!"

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** 15 metres

**DEPTH:** Three metres or more

**TIME:** 10h45

**NARRATIVE:** Niko von Broembsen and 22-year-old Adam Harding had surfed the inside break at The Point for 30 minutes, then they crossed a deep gully and moved into the take-off zone of the outer break, arriving there just as a wave was peaking. Von Broembsen was no more than three metres seaward of Harding. He was above the gully and lying prone on his board, the nose of the board pointing south, and paddling with his left arm. "I didn't see the shark before the attack; it came from the deep water of the bay (from the east) and I was looking south," said Von Broembsen, "Suddenly I was clamped; I couldn't move".

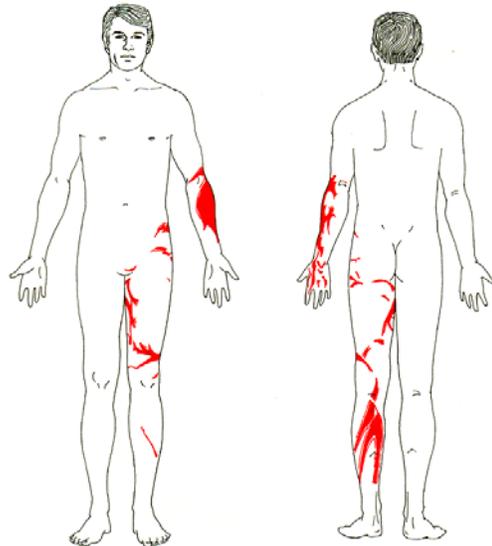
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initial strike wasn't violent or frenzied; the shark's movements were slow, deliberate and controlled. "The shark knocked me off my board, then submerged – still holding me in its mouth – and swam slowly downwards. The shark was shaking me, but I could see its eye so I twisted my right arm around and pushed my fingers into the eye...I just kept pushing my fingers in harder, harder and harder. Finally it let me go and shot off toward the gully.

"I surfaced, got on my board and paddled as fast as I could toward the rocks. As I looked back I saw a trail of blood streaming out behind me, then I saw the shark's dorsal fin break the surface of the water." The surfer scraped over a rocky shelf which reached to within a half-metre of the surface, and into a deep tidal pool. "The shark circled until it intercepted the blood. It followed the blood to the rocky shelf, submerged and disappeared," said von Broembsen. Then a wave pushed me onto the rocks". Harding and Hennie Visser reached the injured surfer moments later, picked him up and carried him to the beach.

**INJURY:** The surfer's left calf, shin, inner and outer thigh, left forearm and hand were mauled by the shark; he sustained multiple deep lacerations, but no tissue was lost. The most serious injury was that of the forearm; although there was no muscle death and the ulnar nerve remained intact, the median and radial nerves were severed. The muscles were stripped from the bone, and the nerves were stripped off all extensors of the left arm from the elbow to the wrist.

"The most remarkable finding was the lack of any crushing effect on the tissues, which one often sees with knife wounds," said Mr Munro, the orthopaedic surgeon. "The wounds were very clean and the patient did not develop any sepsis."



**DAMAGE TO EQUIPMENT:** No teeth impressions were evident in the board, but the left side of the board had two small dents forty centimetres apart.

**FIRST AID:** Mr and Mrs Hennie Visser, tourists from South West Africa, were on the beach when they heard the two surfers screaming. Visser raced over to help Harding carry Von Broembsen from the water while his wife sped to the house where they were staying and tore up sheets to use as tourniquets. "I was aware of everything going on around me," said Von Broembsen, "I knew I was bleeding badly and kept yelling at them to tie tourniquets around my arm and leg."

The surfer was not stabilized on the beach; an ambulance arrived within 20 minutes of the incident and he was transported to Mossel Bay Hospital, arriving there within five minutes. Afterwards he was taken to George Hospital.

**TREATMENT:** "At first I felt no pain, just a pins and needles tingling sensation. The pain came just as I reached Mossel Bay Hospital", said Von Broembsen. At George Hospital the surfer was treated by Dr Sunshine and Mr Munro. There the surfer was given intravenous

replacement fluids, the wounds were debrided and the median and radial nerves were repaired. Two days later the wounds were again debrided and surgically repaired. On September 1st he was transferred to Tygerberg Hospital in Cape Town.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** The incident involved a white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*. Mr Munro estimated the distance between points of insertion of the individual teeth was 3,5 to four-centimetres which suggests that the shark was at least three metres in length. A R1,000 bounty was put on the shark by Johan Oosthuizen, mayor of Mossel Bay.

**SOURCES:** Interviews with Niko von Broembsen, Adam Harding, Dr. Sunshine and Mr. Monro

**COMMENT:** Cape fur seals are usually abundant in this area at this time of year. Their absence in the water suggests that they were aware a hunting shark was in the vicinity and/or the shark had been feeding on them. It is also evident that the attack was directed at the surfer, not at his board.

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Marie Levine