

ACTIVITY: Free diving for abalone

CASE: **GSAF 1995.09.03**

DATE: Sunday 3 September 1995

LOCATION: The incident took place the Pacific Ocean at Shelter Cover, between Eureka and Fort Bragg, in northwestern California, USA.

40°01'N; 124°04'W

NAME: Bryan Hillenburg

DESCRIPTION: He was a 32-year-old male. He was wearing a black neoprene wetsuit with blue striping, hood, face mask, a blue/black BC, with 20 weights, booties, swim fins and he was carrying an abalone pry bar.

SUPPORT BOAT: A 3.3-metre white kayak.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The sky was partly cloudy but there was intermittent sunshine, the air temperature was about 21°C and there was a slight breeze.

MOON PHASE: Waxing Gibbous, 63% of the moon's visible disk was illuminated. Full Moon on 9 September 1995.

SEA CONDITIONS: The sea was calm, water temperature was 13°C and the underwater visibility was two to three metres.

ENVIRONMENT: There were about a dozen adult and many juvenile pinnipeds in the water 100 metres from the incident site. Hillenburg's kayak was anchored over a shallow reef covered in short kelps with sea grass scattered over the reef's surface.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: One kilometre

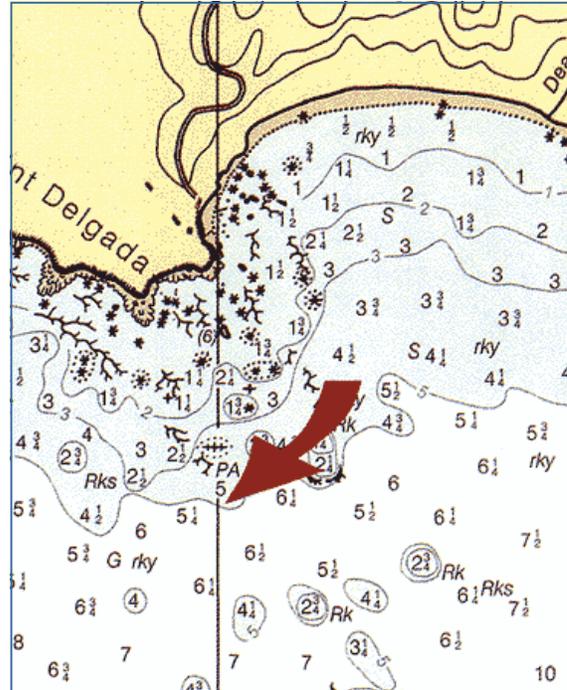
DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE: Five to six fathoms

TIME: 16h00

NARRATIVE: Bryan Hillenburg and his dive buddy, Mike Burns, had been in the water about 30 minutes, during which time they made several exploratory dives and collected two abalone. Following several minutes of hyperventilating, Hillenburg dived to the bottom, locating a third abalone. He removed it from the rock and surfaced, placing his catch in his kayak. Upon resurfacing, the diver was resting momentarily when he felt a sharp bite to his left leg, followed quickly by a dull pain. The shark continued its upward path until its head cleared the surface. The shark held onto the diver for several seconds before releasing its grip on his leg.

Hillenburg pulled himself into the kayak as he wondered what happened to his dive buddy. Within moments, Burns was able to pull himself into the kayak and joined Hillenburg.

INJURY: Hillenburg sustained numerous tooth punctures to his left lower leg with some extending to the bone. Several nerves and tendons were severed, but there was no serious damage to any vessels.



FIRST AID / TREATMENT: Burns and Hillenburg waved down a skiff containing three divers heading back to the beach. Rescuers Andrew Truitt, Stephen Wadsworth and Katherine Stewart picked up the two frightened divers and, with both their kayaks in tow, headed for shore in the now-overloaded aluminum boat. Stewart elevated Hillenburg's leg in an attempt to control the bleeding.

It took almost 30 minutes for the boat to reach shore. Then it required an additional two hours for the ambulance to reach Southern Humboldt Community Hospital in Garberville. According to attending physician R. Hood, when admitted to the hospital Hillenburg was in shock, but alert. The injury was evaluated, the wound cleaned and dressed, and the patient was given a mild sedative. He was then transported to Kaiser Permanente Hospital in Santa Rosa, where surgeons Gansel, Sanghy and Lindee repaired the injuries.

More than four hours of orthopedic surgery was necessary to repair the damaged nerves and tendons, with a minimal number of sutures and staples required for closure. The patient was expected to make a full recovery.

SPECIES INVOLVED: According to the diver, the incident involved a white shark, thought to be three to four metres in length. The occurrence of a large shark in the area is not a surprise, based on the account provided in the shark attack questionnaire by rescuer Steve Wadsworth. He wrote: "However, as a strangely ominous sign (as it turns out in hindsight), as we were motoring out of the bay that morning to begin our dive, we saw what appeared to be a dead Northern Elephant Seal or Sea Lion floating in the water not from where the attack occurred later that day. The animal appeared to have been dead for some time and had what appeared to be a clearly defined, large shark bite on one side. It [the seal] had probably drifted out of the area before the attack."

NOTE: The expression, "A good deed is its own reward" might best described rescuer Andrew Truitt's memory of that day. After assisting Hillenburg and Burns to the beach, Fish & Game Warden Larry Bruckstein cited Truitt for taking two abalone over the legal limit of four. Several onlookers commented that they thought Bruckstein had been too tough on Truitt. Bruckstein commented, "I respect what he [Truitt] did, but I have to treat everyone the same. He took an over limit of abalone and had to be cited." Hopefully, Andrew Truitt found his act of kindness to be sufficient reward to offset the sting of his fine.

SOURCE: Ralph Collier (2003), pages 151-153

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Ralph Collier