

ACTIVITY: Surfing

CASE: GSAF 1996.12.10 / SA-422

DATE: Tuesday December 10, 1996

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Indian Ocean at Duck Pond in Sardinia Bay, 34 kilometres [21.25 miles] southwest of Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.
34°10'S, 24°30' E



NAME: Stephen Cross

DESCRIPTION: The surfer was wearing a ¾" full wetsuit. He is a student pastor.

BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: New Moon, December 10, 1996

SEA CONDITIONS: "The water was a bit warm for my full suit, but I didn't have time to go back and fetch my shorts," said the surfer.

ENVIRONMENT: The surfing site, named Kays las, is off miles of empty beach and uncrowded sandbars. The incident took place seawards of a deep channel.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 200 metres

TIME: 16h15

NARRATIVE: When Stephen Cross and a friend, Greg Heasley, decided to surf, David Webb and Carl Walton had already been surfing for some time. "There were quite a few people on the beach because some girlfriends had arranged a beach braai (bar-b-que) and were just cooling off watching the guys surf, which I suppose was fortunate as they were great encouragement to me later," said Cross. He describes what happened next:

"Fifteen minutes and three short waves later, the first really good set came through. Dave had gone in to put a shortie on and Greg caught the only surfable wave as the rest of the set ran wide and faded into the gully. Carl and I were alone out the back and joking around, when from the corner of my eye I saw the biggest shark I've ever seen. It was coming up from underneath me and slightly to the right. I could see by the way it was moving that there was trouble, and shouted the alarm. Carl immediately whipped around and headed for the beach, assuming I was going to do likewise. The speed [the shark] was going was freaky, because before I could even lie down on my board or at least get my legs out of the water it slammed me from underneath and I lost my surfboard.

"I lunged forward to get back on my board, but as I did the shark spun around from left to right and surfaced on its side, its extended jaws aiming straight at my torso. While all this commotion was going on Carol heard the sound of thrashing water and my screams of fear. He turned around and came back to help, but was knocked clean off his board by the shark's huge powerhouse tail, leaving him pretty helpless too.

"I made a futile attempt to hand the animal off or at least keep it away from my body, but

the shark clamped my lower arm and elbow in its mouth. As it bit into my arm, I felt myself going down. I tried to put my arm around its head to keep myself above the water, but my arm wouldn't fit around it, leaving me looking into this thing's massive black eyeball and perfectly triangular, evenly-spaced teeth.

"As the shark opened its mouth for a second bite, I instinctively pulled my arm back and freed myself. I swiveled to the side of the shark, momentarily feeling a little safer because I was out of its mouth. Then it began swishing its head side-to-side and chomping uncontrollably. The thrashing action actually lifted me onto the shark's back. I was lying on the shark's back, flat on my chest, and began beating its head as much and as hard as I could. All I achieved was grazing my knuckles and damaging my wrists. The shark submerged and I lost sight of it. All of the above took maybe 10 to 15 seconds at most; it was really quick and I didn't really have time to think.

"Carl helped me back onto my board and that's when the fear set in. There was a lot of blood in the water and I knew the shark was merely lining up for another attack. I knew this because Greg and I had been surfing the same spot a month earlier and I had a clear view of a great white [shark] through the wall of a wave. I went home and did some research, which gave me good reason to believe this ordeal was not over. I was about 200 metres out and losing blood at a rate I did not think was possible, and still had to paddle through a deep inshore channel. Just to make my day there wasn't a wave in sight. I was screaming out to Jesus, screaming at the top of my voice until there was blood in my throat. I want to make certain He would hear me.

"We'd been paddling for about 30 seconds when the shark surfaced behind me and began chomping away at my feet area. All I can say is Jesus most definitely heard me because the shark bit off a piece of my leash, missing my feet by 10 centimetres. It submerged once again and went between Carl and I towards the beach, turned around and headed out again. By this time we were in shallow enough water to make it to the sand."

INJURY: The lacerations to the surfer's right elbow were three-centimeters-deep.

DAMAGE TO SURFBOARD: Unknown

FIRST AID: "When I hit the beach the blood was gushing out and Carl, who was an army medic, used his leash to make a tourniquet and stop the bleeding. All of those on the beach began to either go for help or stay with me. We decided to use the rest of the adrenaline to make it back to the cars. It took us about 30 minutes to get back, by which time I was finished and fainted. I came around in the back of John Scholtz's kombi. John is my pastor and a former doctor. My wetsuit had been removed and my elbow looked as if it was turned inside out, but I was alive."

TREATMENT: Thirty sutures were needed to repair the injuries to the patient's elbow.

SPECIES INVOLVED: The incident involved a white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*.

SOURCES: Stephen Cross; Daily News, December 11, 1996; Natal Mercury, December 11, 1996; ZigZag magazine, March-April 1997, page 77

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Andrew Gifford, Shark Research Institute

