



ACTIVITY: Swimming

CASE: **GSAF 1998.11.21**

DATE: Saturday November 21, 1998

LOCATION: The accident took place in the Atlantic Ocean at Jaycee Beach (Vero Beach), Indian River County, Florida, USA.

NAME: James Willie Tellasmon

DESCRIPTION: The swimmer was a nine-year-old male.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: Witnesses reported the sky was sunny. At 13h50 the Vero Beach weather station recorded an air temperature of 80.6°F [27°C], dew point was 71.6°F [22°C], humidity 74%, sea surface pressure was 30.09 inches [1019 hPa] and wind direction was Northeast at 9.3 mph [14.8 km/h]. An hour later, at 14h51, the wind had shifted and was North-Northeast, the air temperature had dipped to 77°F [25°C] and the humidity climbed to 83%.

MOON PHASE: New Moon, November 18, 1998

SEA CONDITIONS: Outgoing tide

ENVIRONMENT: Sandy beach, with a small reef about 50 to 75 yards offshore. Very low visibility (six to twelve inches), based on information from Victor E. Harrell and Thomas K. Adams, Lifeguard Captains.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 50 yards

DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE: Eight to ten feet

TIME: 14h40

NARRATIVE: About 40 swimmers were in the water. James Willie Tellasmon was swimming in an unprotected section of the beach. He was observed having difficulty swimming, prompting a family friend, Jimmy Wilson, to go to his aid. Wilson was not a good swimmer and was not able to reach Tellasmon. William Heffelfinger and his friends ran into

the surf and swam towards the two struggling swimmers. During the rescue attempt Tellasmon and Wilson drifted further offshore to waters about eight feet deep. No discolored water (i.e., blood) was ever seen around Tellasmon by Wilson or the rescuers. The rescuers finally reached Wilson but by then Tellasmon had drifted even further away.

Meanwhile, Kendrick Banks ran south on the beach and alerted a lifeguard. Several lifeguards went into the surf and searched for the boy. The lifeguards were soon assisted by the Indian River Shores Public Safety Unit, the Indian River County Sheriff's Aviation Unit, and the United States Coast Guard. The search was called off at 17h45 due to darkness. The search was resumed on Sunday morning at 05h30. The body of Tellasmon was recovered at 07h22 by rescue divers. On Monday at 09h00 an autopsy was conducted by district medical examiner, Dr. Frederick Hobin. At 09h30, Dr. Hobin contacted the Vero Beach Police Department and advised them that Tellasmon had been attacked by a large shark. His ruling: Accidental death caused by a shark attack.

COMMENT: Despite the medical examiner's ruling, there appears some doubt that Tellasmon's death resulted from the bite of a shark. That the body was bitten by a large shark is not questioned, but some of the bites appear to be post-mortem, possibly inflicted by a tiger shark, *Galeocerdo cuvier*, of at least 11 feet (based on gaps of one inch between tooth impressions), and teleost fish (e.g. snappers) also scavenged on the torso. It seems possible that the boy, caught in the strong rip current, drowned and his body was carried a distance offshore where it was scavenged by several species of sharks and marine animals.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Erich Ritter, Ph.D.