

**ACTIVITY:** Scuba Diving

**CASE:** **GSF 2004.01.25**

**DATE:** Sunday January 25, 2004

**LOCATION:** The incident took place at Binningup, Western Australia, Australia. Binningup is located 30 kilometres or so north of Bunbury and about 127 kilometres south of Perth.

**NAME:** Allan Darcy Oppert

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** The diver, a 46-year-old male, is 173 cm to 179 cm [5'8" to 5'10"] in height and weighs 94 kg, and is a New Zealand Maori. He was wearing a 5mm Appollo SubZero black wetsuit with "Appollo" written in iridescent green on one leg and arm. He wore a watch under his wet suit and was also wearing a brown BCD with blue vertical stripes on the lower pockets at the front, black mask, grey fins and a scuba tank with a Combo Gage. He was carrying a Sea Hornet silver aluminium speargun with a 32-inch stainless steel shaft, and six-inch head with a black handgrip. He had no injuries prior to the incident.

**DESCRIPTION OF SUPPORT BOAT:** A white-hulled, 17-foot KingCraft skippered by Dave Morgan.

## BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** The air temperature was 30°C and there was a 15- to 18-knot northwesterly wind.

**MOON PHASE:** New Moon, January 22, 2004.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The water was blue with estimated underwater visibility of 100 feet. Sea temperature measured at the site was 22°C [71.6°F]. The sea was choppy and the current was from the south. Low tide was at 06h00.

**ENVIRONMENT:** Topside, the area consists of wide sandy beaches. Underwater, the area consists of little outcrops of plate coral, and no channel was present. Two boats were fishing for skippy (trevally) nearby, one boat had a single fishing line in the water and the other boat had two fishing lines. One person had vomited overboard.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** 23.9 km [14 miles]

**DISTANCE FROM BOAT:** 20 metres [65 feet]

**DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE:** 30 metres [98 feet], and diver was at a depth of 18 metres [60 feet] when he was bitten

**TIME:** 11h05

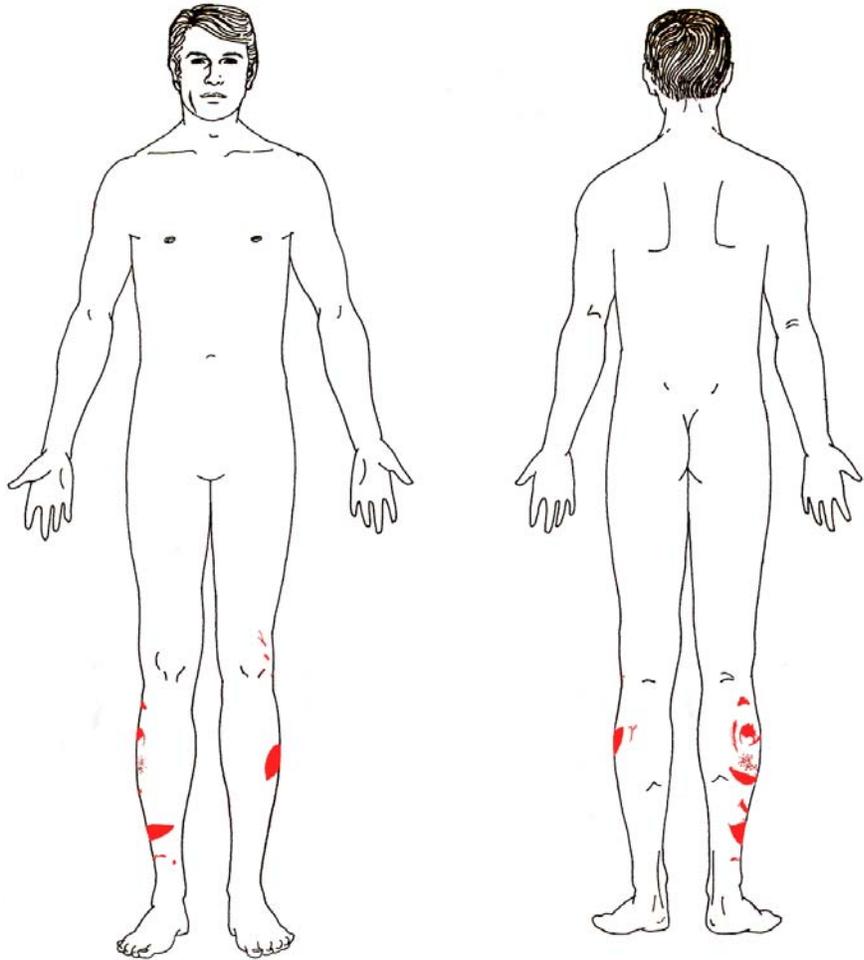
**NARRATIVE:** There were two people on the support boat (skipper Dave Morgan, diver Daniel Armstrong). Steve Penizza, Steve Oglivie and Milan Kitto were on another boat nearby. Allen Oppert had entered the sea moments earlier (he had not speared any fish). He was alone in the water, facing seawards and descending to recover crayfish when he



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spotted the shark below him on the seafloor swimming in a zig-zag pattern.

Allen inflated his BCD in order to maintain his position at 18 metres. At this point, the shark swam deliberately at him (approaching from below and to the front of the diver), and engulfed both legs including swim fins. As the diver saw the shark charge, he braced himself, took a deep breath and tensed his body. Then the shark bit down on Allen's legs. The diver thought that the shark shook him from side-to-side pushing him through the water for what seemed like 20 seconds, its nose pressing hard against his chest. As the diver hit the shark on the face with a crayfish snare its mouth opened wider. Then he went to stab the shark in the eye but his knife was lost. Next, the diver went for his speargun but the shark had bitten through it and snapped the stainless steel shaft. (The diver believes that both the knife and speargun shaft fell into the shark's mouth.) Allen's mask had become dislodged but he managed to clear it and his BCD suddenly became fully inflated. The shark released Allan at a depth 20 metres [65 feet] and the diver swam to the surface.



When Allan surfaced and raised the alarm, the boat skipper unhooked the anchor and the crew cut the fishing line. The boat, which was 20 metres from the diver, came at once to and retrieved the diver. As they pulled Allan on board, the shark appeared about five feet from the surface and circled the boat.

**INJURY:** Photographs taken prior to surgery show an arc of very widely-spaced tooth impressions along the lateral aspect of the left leg running from above the ankle and along the calf to just above the patella. Both legs were bitten. The diver believes that the severity of the injury may have been reduced because the stainless steel shaft of the speargun was across the diver's legs from his hips to his knees and thus prevented his legs from being severed. He said, "The shark couldn't bite down any further because the shaft had probably lodged in its mouth or throat which appeared to cause a gag reflex."

**FIRST AID:** The skipper, Dave Morgan, and fellow diver, Daniel Armstrong and the victim rendered first aid. (The divers and skipper had just completed a senior first aid course four weeks earlier.) Morgan and Armstrong assisted Allan in wrapping a towel and jumper around his legs to stop the bleeding. While the boat was returning to shore, and ambulance was called. The diver did not start to feel pain until he arrived at the hospital 35 minutes after he was bitten.

**TREATMENT:** The diver was treated at Bunbury Regional Hospital in Bunbury. No tooth fragments were seen on x-ray and his wounds were photographed. Surgical repair of the injuries was performed by Dr. Newman.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** According to witnesses, the shark was between four and five metres total length, and the bite pattern on the diver's leg is that of a white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*). The diver estimated the distance between the eyes of the shark was about 88 cm [35 inches].

**CASE INVESTIGATORS:** Terry & Valerie Peake, Shark Research Institute, Western Australia.

***Some comments by other GSAF researchers:***

This was not a predatory bout. In predatory bouts, a white shark usually approaches from behind the victim and disables him/her by a bite on the leg/s (swimming apparatus). Although the shark bit the diver's legs, it probably did so because that was the first part of the diver it could latch on to. It is likely that this was a competitive/warning bite. The legs were not chosen to reduce the diver's locomotion but because they were accessible and allowed the shark to get its message across.

The shark was there all the time, that explains why it approached so quickly when the diver submerged, and why from the front. There was not much planning from the shark's side - it just wanted to get the situation resolved.

The zig-zag motion of the shark, and the fishing activity close are important. The zig-zagging showed "agitation" in a "decision-struggling manner." The shark may have been unsure whether to approach or swim away and so lowered both lateral fins (to increase manoeuvrability and hence its ability to react) while approaching. The lowering of pectoral fins makes the swim pattern of a shark more awkward (i.e., zig-zag). A shark will often do this while approaching an unfamiliar object...it "gets ready" in case it needs to alter its swim pattern in a hurry.

The spear gun, although bitten through, was not the reason that the wound is superficial; the shark had no intention of biting harder...That the diver felt 'pushed' is most likely the result of the impact and the subconscious decision of the diver to get away.

Contact was less than 10 to 20 seconds; the wound pattern would be much less "organized" if they indeed were locked together for such a long time with very different intentions about how to resolve the situation. The pattern of the wounds indicate the shark didn't shake the diver; the diver moved his legs while the shark was holding him.

Most probably, the diver appeared in the temporal feeding territory of the shark, created by

the fishermen, and he was viewed as a competitor that had to be driven away. The encounter was effective from the shark's point of view; after the bite the diver ascended (withdrew). That the shark shadowed the diver to the surface seems more likely to be due to its now-increased curiosity but not as a prelude of a second bite since the initial "strike" resolved the shark's initial "stress situation".

*The diver's speargun was later recovered by Laurie Dyer. Allan Oppert (holding speargun)*



*The damaged speargun: a, b & c*

