



**ACTIVITY:** Swimming

**CASE:** [GSAF 2005.06.22](#)

**DATE:** Wednesday June 22, 2005

**LOCATION:** The attack took place in the South Pacific Ocean off a beach on the island of Atchin. The island lies about 50 metres off Malakula Island, Malampa Province, Vanuatu (formerly, New Hebrides).

**NAME:** Alysha Margaret Webster

**DESCRIPTION:** She was a seven-year-old female from Whitianga on the Coromandel Peninsula of New Zealand's North Island. She was on a yachting holiday with her parents, Grant and Sheree Webster, her paternal grandparents and friends.



## BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** It was a cloudy day with occasional rain showers, the air temperature was 81°F and there were 5 to 10 mph NE breezes.

**MOON PHASE:** Full moon, 100% of the moon's visible disk was illuminated.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The water was clear.

**ENVIRONMENT:** Vanuatu, a chain of 83 islands in the southwest Pacific between New Caledonia and Fiji, is a popular holiday destination for New Zealanders. Malakula is well known for shark attacks and a number of local children have been killed over the years in similar circumstances. Local yachties say that bay is so notorious for sharks it is marked on maps as an area where people should not swim. A local tour operator on the mainland, Peter Fidelio, said tourists were always warned not to swim at Atchin Island. "People here realise it's not safe," said Fidelio Port Vila Press. High Commissioner Paul Willis said it was customary to check with a local chief or village to see if it was safe to swim in nearby waters. "In this case, I understand there were local people around, so clearly the family might have had some reason to expect that it wasn't going to be too dangerous," Willis told Radio New Zealand.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** "A few metres"

**TIME:** Afternoon

**NARRATIVE:** The Webster family had sailed to Vanuatu on a catamaran, the *Windshadow*, they had built and shared with close friends and near-neighbours, the Morcom family. "We had a common love of sailing and had sailed on each other's boats previously and then built this boat together as two families," Keith Morcom said

They sailed from the Vanuatu capital of Port Vila to Malakula. Lapen Tilison, a teacher on Atchin Island and who has lived there all his life, had five children, who all knew not to swim in the sea. "We swim in the fresh water, not on the beach," he said. Tilison said he always warns visiting yachties to stay out of the water. He paddled out in a canoe to the *Windshadow* just after it pulled into the attractive white, sandy bay where he lived, shortly before lunchtime. "They had just dropped the anchor and jumped in for a swim. I went out and introduced myself and told them it was not safe to swim in the sea." Tilison said he made it clear that fishing boats came into the bay to wash down, and the strong smell attracted sharks. A fishing boat was at the beach that day doing just that, he said. "I told them not to swim because here we do not swim in the salt water."

Tilison said he invited the family, to relax onshore instead. They got out of the water and had lunch, but afterwards went for another swim. Mr Tilison said he went back to the boat to warn them again. He heard Alysha asked her mother if she could go for a swim, and was told that it was not safe. But she went in for a swim and 10 minutes later she was attacked by a shark.

Grant and Sheree Webster were sitting on the beach watching Alysha playing in the shallows. Their other children (an older daughter, Jessica, and a younger son, James) were playing in a canoe nearby. Local children were swimming in deeper water and felt the shark pass them before it attacked Alysha.



Alysha Webster

Mr Webster did not see the shark, but he saw his daughter submerge, then surface and cry

out. He rushed into the water to Alysha, and found her with extensive injuries.

**INJURY:** Fatal. Her left leg was severed at the thigh and her left abdomen and torso was severely bitten. Death resulted from exsanguination.

**FIRST AID:** Mr and Mrs Webster used a dinghy from their yacht to take Alysha to the mainland. They then flagged down a truck, which drove them to Norsup Hospital about seven kilometres away. The drive took about 30 minutes. The child was dead on arrival at the hospital.

Next day (Thursday June 23, 2005), a plane chartered by the New Zealand High Commission flew the Websters and Alysha's body back to Port Vila. They will also assist the family with their return home.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** Not identified. The narrow stretch of water between Atchin and Malekula is a busy waterway, and many canoeists had reported seeing a large shark after Alysha was killed. One said he saw a dog snapped up as it tried to swim between the islands. Tiger sharks frequent the area as do other large sharks. However, Tilison said just two days earlier locals saw a great white shark in the area. "It was a very big one. They thought it was the same one [that killed the child]." He said this was the fourth death he remembered, the last was three years ago.

On Saturday August 13, 2005, at the same spot where Alysha was killed, anglers from Whangarei, New Zealand, caught and killed a shark 2.8 metres in length with an estimated mass of 140-kilograms. It was believed to be the shark that killed Alysha.

**SOURCES:** New Zealand Herald, 6/24/2005 edition, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/index.cfm?c\\_id=1&ObjectID=10332437](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/index.cfm?c_id=1&ObjectID=10332437); TV1 News (New Zealand); Michelle Quirke, The Press, June 24, 2005, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/thepress/0,2106,3323631a6009,00.html>.

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Richard D. Weeks, Global Shark Accident File.



*The 2.8 m shark*