

**ACTIVITY:** Spearfishing

**CASE:** [GSAF 2006.01.25](#)

**DATE:** Wednesday January 25, 2006

**LOCATION:** The incident took place at Hole-in-the-Wall near Coffee Bay, Wild Coast, South Africa.

31°58'S, 29°09'E

**NAME:** Michael Vriese

**DESCRIPTION:** He is a 34-year-old male from Scottburgh. He was wearing a full wetsuit.

### BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** It was a warm, sunny day and the air temperature was about 24°C.

At 14h00, the weather station at Port St. Johns recorded scattered clouds and visibility of 14 miles [23 km]. The air temperature was 78°F, air temperature of 78°F [26°C], dew point 71°F [22°C], humidity 74%, sea level pressure 29.92 inches [1013 hPa], and wind direction was NE at 11.5 mph [18.5 km/h].

**MOON PHASE:** Waning Crescent, 22% of the moon was illuminated.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The water was dirty and underwater visibility was poor.

**TIME:** Just after 14h00

**NARRATIVE:** Vriese had been spearfishing with a partner, Neil Abel, for about 30 minutes. He had just shot a grunter and was reeling in his fish when the shark attempted to take his catch. The shark displayed no aggression toward the diver, but his right arm was bitten as the shark took the speared fish.

**INJURY:** Two arteries in the diver's right arm were severed and muscles and nerves on his wrist and forearm were damaged.

**FIRST AID:** Neil Abel initially drove Vriese to a clinic near Hole-in-the-Wall. "They took one look at my arm and told me to rush for Mthatha [formerly, Umtata]," said Vriese. An hour later, Vriese was stabilized at a private clinic in Mthatha by Dr Tinus Laubscher, who



Photo: Tony Carmie, Cape Mercury

Michael Vriese



Coffee Bay

clamped Vriese's arteries to stem the blood loss and said that his injuries required specialist emergency treatment by vascular surgeons. When family members in Scottburgh heard about Vriese's plight, they contacted Netcare, which arranged for a team of paramedics to fly to Mthatha in a light aircraft and bring the injured man to Durban. Dr. Laubscher accompanied Vriese in an ambulance to Mthatha Airport, where they waited next to the runway.



*Hole-in-the-Wall, Coffee Bay*

The aircraft was due to land at 19h45, but it was dark and the landing lights were not switched on. At the control tower, a guard told Dr. Laubscher that no one had keys to get to the light switches. "We couldn't even contact the aircraft by radio from the control tower and eventually we managed to get hold of one of the paramedics on the plane by cellphone. The paramedic said they were low on fuel and could only circle for another 10 minutes. I told him to hang on while I tried to sort things out," said Dr. Laubscher.

"I forced my way into the control tower, but there was a huge Trellidor in the way and the only apparent entry point was through a window. So I phoned a senior SA Police director at 20h00, explained the situation and asked if I could break in. He told me to wait while he contacted the airport manager. I phoned again at 20h35 and he urged me to wait a little longer. In the meantime, we were phoning the paramedics and pleading for them to circle for another 10 minutes. Finally, at 20h40, I took a fire extinguisher off the wall and smashed a window so the manager could get at the lights. The lights went off twice while the plane was coming in and it finally landed at 20h50."

"This whole chartered emergency mission was almost a complete waste," said Dr. Laubscher. "He needed treatment urgently because the blood supply to the tissues in his hand and forearm was restricted. Sharks don't brush their teeth, so the risk of infection also increased with time. The torn muscle tendons also pull back shorter and shorter and eventually disappear if you don't stop them in time. So time was absolutely crucial. We couldn't delay. This is an airport which has just been upgraded. It was going to be closed down at one point because cattle had been chased away from the runway while planes were coming into land."

**TREATMENT:** Vriese was airlifted to Entabeni Hospital in Durban where he received four units of blood. Vascular surgeons repaired his severed arteries in a five-hour surgical procedure on Wednesday evening with additional surgery on Thursday.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** According to Vriese, the incident involved a 3,7 metre [12-foot] Zambesi shark, *Carcharhinus leucas*.

**SOURCES:** The Mercury, January 27, 2006, page 1; Paul de Bruyn, Oceanographic Research Institute, Durban; The Herald (Port Elizabeth)

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Jeremy Cliff, Natal Sharks Board