

ACTIVITY: Floating

CASE: [GSAF 1905.12.31](#) / SA-031

DATE: Sunday December 31, 1905

LOCATION: Back Beach, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. In Durban's early days swimming was confined to Durban Bay, now Durban Harbour. Back Beach was the name given to the beaches along the Indian Ocean.

29°51.1'S, 31°02.04'E

NAME: Erich Suppeman

DESCRIPTION: The swimmer, a white male, was wearing only a blue shirt. He was a cabin boy on the Norwegian sailing ship *Blanca*.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The day was hot and sunny with a strong breeze.

MOON PHASE: New Moon, December 26, 1905

SEA CONDITIONS: High tide was at 08h12 and 20h33.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 20 metres

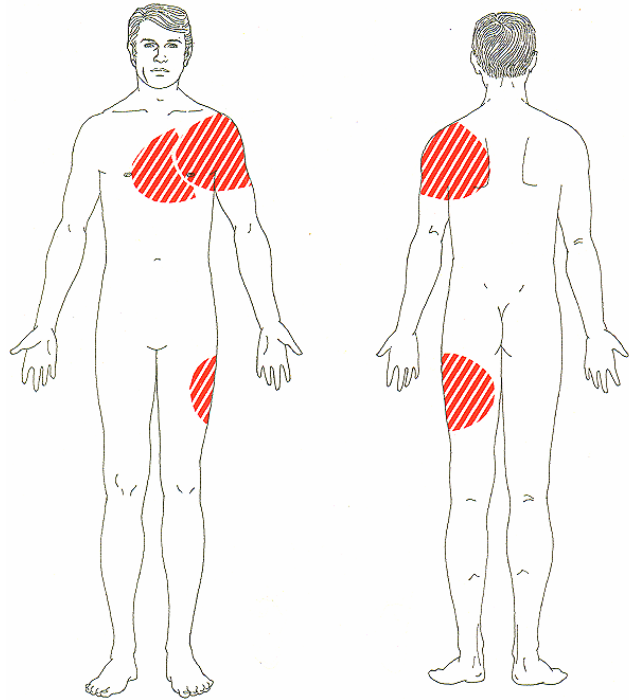
DEPTH: 1,2 metres

TIME: Morning

NARRATIVE: Erich Suppeman and Wilhelm Burmeister, a deckhand from the *St Sylfed*, went ashore at 06h00 to see the town. A few hours they later went to Back Beach where about a dozen people were swimming. The two men body-surfed for a time and one

account says they were standing together, waiting to catch a breaker, while another says Suppeman was “lying motionless full-length in the water when the shark seized him by the heel”. Both agree that Suppeman was seawards of Burmeister when he suddenly screamed. Burmeister turned round and saw that “a shark had got hold of him on the right side of his chest.” He reached Suppeman, grabbed him and pulled him ashore.

INJURY: In the January 1, 1906 edition of the *Natal Mercury* a witness described Suppeman's injuries: “The principal bite of the fish had evidently been in the fleshy part at the back and at the top of the left thigh. The back part of the thigh was taken completely away and the bite was so clean that it seemed as if a huge gouge had been dropped down on the leg and made a clean concave cut about eight inches (20 centimetres) long and four or five inches (10 to 12 centimetres) into the flesh. In addition to this awful wound the voracious shark had made a valiant effort to get at the young man's heart for his left breast was ruthlessly ripped open, and his left shoulder terribly lacerated.” (Note: a second account states: “the initial bite was on the leg; after Suppeman shouted for help, Burmeister turned around and saw that a shark had got hold of him on the side of his chest.”)



FIRST AID: The witness continued, “It was clear to me, as soon as the poor man was hauled out of the water, that under no circumstances could he live long, and I believe that he expired within a few minutes of being placed in a safe position on the sand.” Apparently the other swimmers were unaware of the attack because the witness continues, “I promptly rushed off down towards the Point to call out of the water the dozen or so bathers who were there disporting themselves unconscious of the catastrophe that had happened, and then I returned to the scene of the accident. The young fellow was dead by this time.”

Suppeman was buried in Wesleyan Cemetery, Durban.

SPECIES: Not identified. After the attack, a shark, 2,4 metres [eight feet] in length, was observed cruising among the breakers.

SOURCES: Natal Mercury, January 1, 1906; Natal Mercury Pictorial, January 10, 1906

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Marie Levine