

**ACTIVITY:** Lifesaving Drill

**CASE:** GSAF 1950.03.08 / SA-098

**DATE:** Wednesday March 8, 1950

**LOCATION:** The incident took place in the Indian Ocean at North Beach, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. 29°51,1'S, 31°02,4'E

**NAME:** Brian Von Berg

**DESCRIPTION:** The swimmer, a 20-year-old male, was 1,78 metres tall, weighed 70 kilograms, and was clad in black swimming trunks. He wore no jewelry and had no injuries before entering the sea. The victim was a very strong swimmer and a member of the Durban Surf Life-savers Club.

### BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** On the day of the incident Durban Met office recorded temperatures of 17° to 29°C, and no rain fell. At 08h30 there was 6/8 cloud cover and a gentle nine-knot southwesterly breeze and at 15h00 7/8 cloud cover and a light five-knot south-easterly breeze.

**MOON PHASE:** Third Quarter, March 11, 1950

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The sea was calm but slightly dirty. A south-to-north current was flowing. Von Berg was in a channel when he disappeared. Mean high tide was at 18h20.

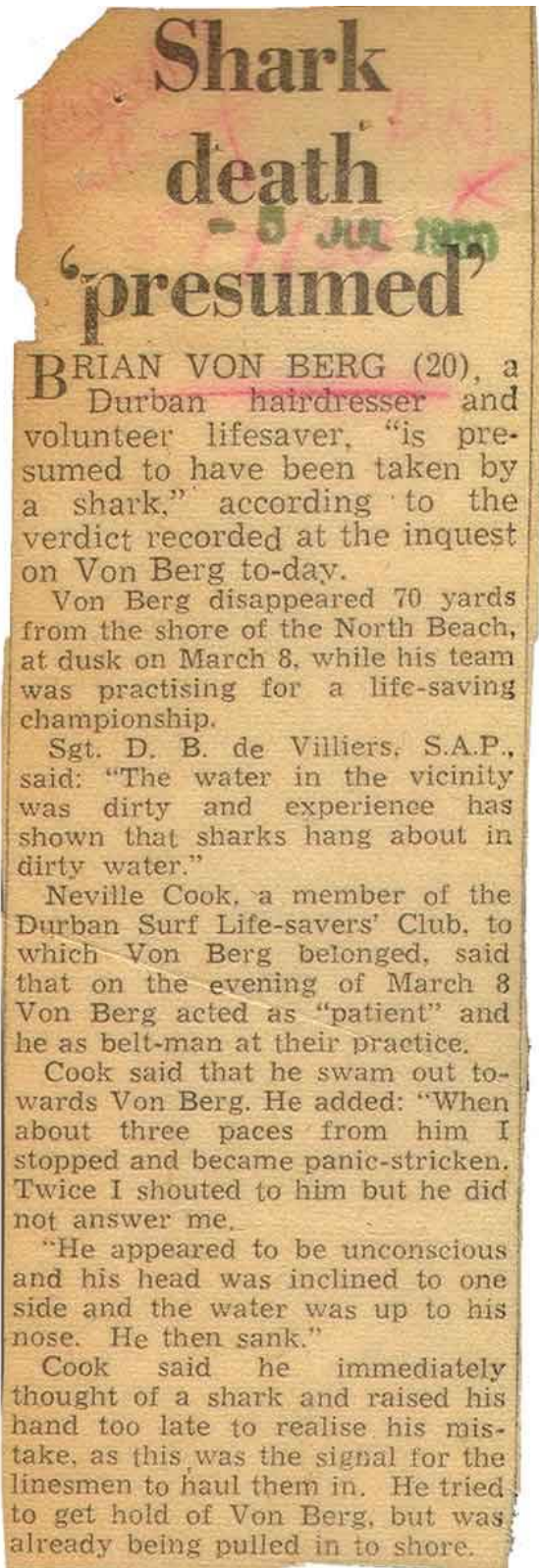
**ENVIRONMENT:** According to life-saver Lou Johnson, a shark was seen in the vicinity during an aerial search conducted the morning after the incident.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** Von Berg was between 65 and 125 metres from the beach; he was behind the backline of breakers.

**DEPTH:** More than three metres

**TIME:** 18h50

**NARRATIVE:** Brian von Berg was engaged in a life-saving drill when he disappeared. His team was to participate in the Life-saving Championships scheduled to be held at Scottburgh on March 26, 1950 and had been conducting drills since 17h00. Von Berg swam out to sea to act as dummy for a practice rescue. He was the only person in the water. (It should be noted that in practice rescues the life-savers raised their arms to signal that they were in



place and ready to be rescued; they did not thrash about in the water to simulate drowning victims.) Suddenly Von Berg waved his arms and shouted. Neville Cook, acting as belt-man, swam towards Von Berg. "It was dusk; I could barely make out Brian's head in the darkness," said Cook. "When I was about six metres from him I stopped and became panic stricken. Twice I shouted to him but he did not answer. He appeared to be unconscious, his head was inclined to the side and the water was up to his nose. Then he sank."

Cook immediately thought of a shark and raised his hand, too late he realized his mistake; this was the signal for the linesmen to haul them in. He tried to get hold of Von Berg but was pulled towards shore. When he was 12 metres from the beach Cook was able to tell the other life-savers that the drill had gone wrong and swam to where he had last seen Von Berg. The search for Von Berg's body, in the sea and along the shore, continued throughout the night by life-savers and members of the police and fire departments. At first light the search was continued northward along the coast. The body was never recovered and the Death Register reads "presumed taken by a shark" as the cause of death.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** Not identified

**SOURCE:** Interview with Neville Cook on October 6, 1986

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Marie Levine



## CH-IN DURBAN BEACH TRAGEDY

# Man Disappears During Night Surf Practice

*Crash*  
*back*  
*shout*  
*9 MAR 1950*  
*PAC 7/8 ✓*

**DURING** a practice lifesaving rescue on Durban Beach last night, Brian van Berg (20) a European hairdresser, of Dickens Chambers, Field Street, playing "victim," disappeared in the surf. He was not seen again.

### POLICE PATROLS

A widespread search was organised. Two harbour police launches patrolled to seaward as close inshore as they could get. On the beach South African Police and the Durban Fire Department kept watch, helping lifesavers with a portable searchlight on the sands.

## Rumour Of Shark Attack

**T**HE lights of a motor car, pushed and carried bodily to the water's edge, also lit up the surf as the search went on. Rumours that Van Berg had been killed by a shark could not be confirmed from responsible sources last night.

At dusk yesterday a team from the Durban Surf Lifesaving Club went down to the Amusement Park beach to practise. The team is one of many taking part in the Lifesaving Championships at Scottburgh on March 26.

At 6.50 p.m., just before dark, Brian van Berg, who was a very strong swimmer, swam out about 70 yards as "dummy" for the practice rescue. When he got out as far as he wished from shore he began to wave his arms and shout, "The Natal Mercury" was told last night. This, the reporter was informed, is always part of the "victim's" duties in the practice rescue and Van Berg always entered into it with zest and made as much noise and fuss as he could.

possibility that Van Berg was taken by a shark is not discounted, as sharks were seen off the Umgeni mouth during the late afternoon, when marksmen engaged them with rifles as target practice.

Van Berg is understood to have worked for the Empire Hairdressing Saloon near the Traffic centre, and is believed to have no parents. He was a popular and keen general sportsman.

### Shark Proofing

Councillor Frank Cheek told "The Natal Mercury" last night that a meeting had already been arranged and would be held towards the end of this week, to see what could be done to have the proposed shark-proof enclosure on the beach put up, even in a cheaper and more quickly built form. A £60,000 scheme had at one time been suggested, but the Government would pass the project only if all the steel needed was imported and there was a gain on South African steel. It was estimated that the project would delay the

at under  
about Van Berg emerged above water again. Before Cook could grab at his hair—he was reaching out to grasp his friend—Van Berg vanished again. A quantity of bubbles came up but no trace was seen of Van Berg.

The lifesaving team, believing that Cook had "rescued" Van Berg, began hauling on the line and pulled Cook to within 40 feet of the beach before he managed to shout to them that things had gone wrong. He plunged at once into the waves and repeated attempts were made to find Van Berg and bring him to shore.

The Police were informed and the Harbour Department notified. Two Water Police radio-telephone launches went out and patrolled the sea offshore for some while. They were joined by the duty crashboat from 35 S.A.A.F. Squadron and a Naval patrol launch also went out to help in the search.

Ashore, a fire engine searchlight was rigged up on the sands with a stretcherful of batteries, and this was played on the rescue parties in the surf by a Fire Department rating.

### No Statement

Other searchers scoured the sands with powerful handlamps and a motor car was brought across the sand, half pulled, half carried bodily by 20 or 30 helpers until it reached the hard wet area at the sea's edge. Its headlights were played on the water as well.

No official statement was made on the tragedy last night by the Club. It is proposed to hold a Club inquiry today. "The Natal Mercury" understands that the

1 MAR 1950

*Wesley's  
Pater's  
Shank*

# Fishermen Search For Drowned Man

UNSUCCESSFUL attempts were made yesterday by Indian fine net fishermen to find the body of the Durban surf lifesaver, Brian van Berg, who was drowned on Wednesday night.

At the request of Mr. E. Pilz, secretary of the Durban Surf Lifesavers Club, Mr. D. B. Singh, Indian Life Saving Club captain, through Mr. P. R. Pather, asked Indian fishermen to drag their nets over the spot on North Beach where Brian van Berg was drowned.

About 20 Indian fishermen agreed to help and brought two boats from their launching site near Addington Hospital to the North Beach.

Two attempts were made yesterday. The first effort was made at six o'clock in the morning and the second at 10.45.

Both were marred by heavy breakers and strong backwash.