



ACTIVITY: Spearfishing

CASE: [GSAF 1978.12.12 / SA-272](#)

DATE: Tuesday December 12, 1978

LOCATION: The attack took place in the Indian Ocean off Sodwana, 317 kilometres north-east of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. In 1978 this was an isolated but popular resort on the Zululand coast run by the Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board.

27°32,5'S, 32°40,08'E

NAME: Phillip `Flip' Steenkamp

DESCRIPTION: The diver, a 23-year-old male, was wearing a light blue speedo, mask, snorkel, swim fins, dive knife, and carrying a speargun. It is not known if he wore any jewelry or had any injuries before the incident.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: It was "a perfect clear day" according to witnesses. The meteorological office recorded 2/8 cloud cover, temperatures from 17 to 25C, no rain, and a moderate 13-knot southeasterly breeze.

MOON PHASE: Full Moon, December 14, 1978

SEA CONDITIONS: A fairly strong south-to-north current was flowing, the tide was incoming, and water visibility was 12 metres. The water temperature was about 16°C, unusually cold for the area.

ENVIRONMENT: Rock Cod reef, now known as Quarter-Mile reef, stretches across the bay from Jesser Point. It lies parallel to shore and extends outside the bay. The reef is 14 metres deep on the seaward side and rises to three or four metres in places. It has little coral, but is honeycombed with caves and gullies on the seaward side. Large gamefish often patrol the seaward side of the reef, but neither Flip Steenkamp nor his dive buddy, Anton Marais, had speared any fish before the incident. Divers at Leven Point, 43 kilometres south of Sodwana, reported shoals of flyingfish, garfish and Spanish mackerel. They also noted that the beach was littered with thousands of shrimp, juvenile triggerfish, small squid, mollusc glaucus, bluebottles and varieties of small fish about four millimetres in length.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: The attack occurred 100 metres from shore and about 300 metres from the main bathing beach.

DEPTH: Unknown, but the attack took place at the surface.

TIME: 16h45

NARRATIVE: Flip Steenkamp and Anton Marais had been diving on Rock Cod Reef for 75 minutes and were on their way back to shore when the accident took place.

Marais was swimming two metres ahead of Steenkamp when he heard him thrashing behind, and turned to look. The shark had grabbed Steenkamp across both legs, half lifted him from the water and was shaking him from side to side. Steenkamp tried to pry the shark's jaws open with his hands and shouted for help. As Marais swam towards the shark, it released its victim and, as it swam in a tight circle and came in again with its mouth open, Marais fired a spear into its gill region. The shark swam off, dragging spear, gun and stringer. The stringer wrapped around Marais' ankle and he was dragged six metres through the water before he was able to free himself. Marais then returned to Steenkamp, put his hand under his neck, supporting his head above the surface of the water, and brought him to shore.

INJURY: Fatal. The shark made a single bite, but did not remove any tissue; its lower jaw bit through the heel and calf muscle of the left leg down to the tibia. The tibia was nicked by the points of the shark's teeth; the nicks were 10 millimetres apart. It appeared that the upper jaw of the shark cut through the calf muscles of the right leg. The arteries of both legs were severed. The fingers of both hands were severely lacerated.

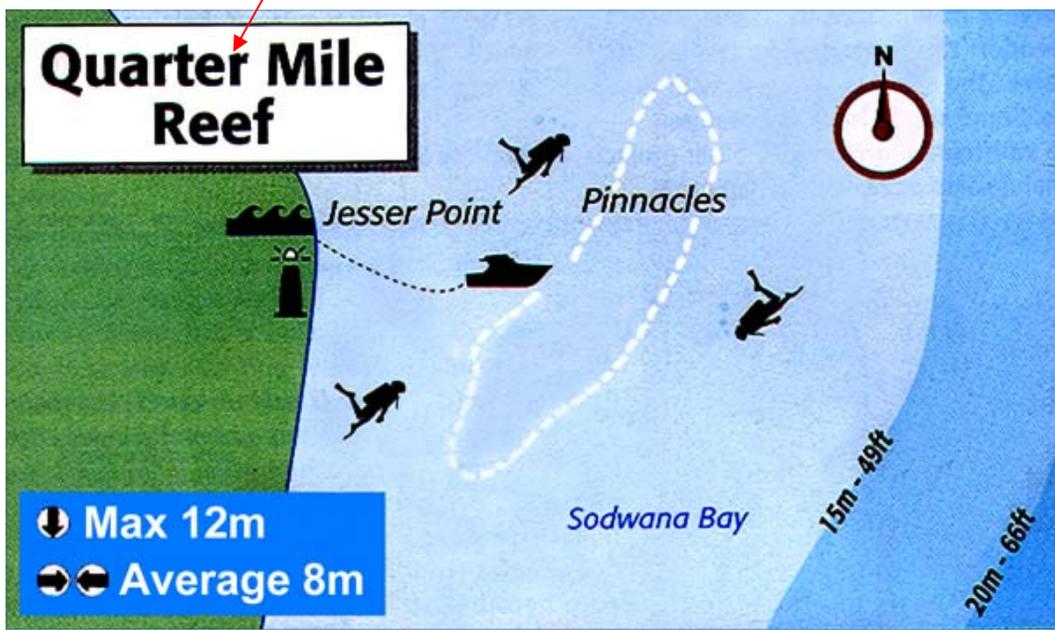
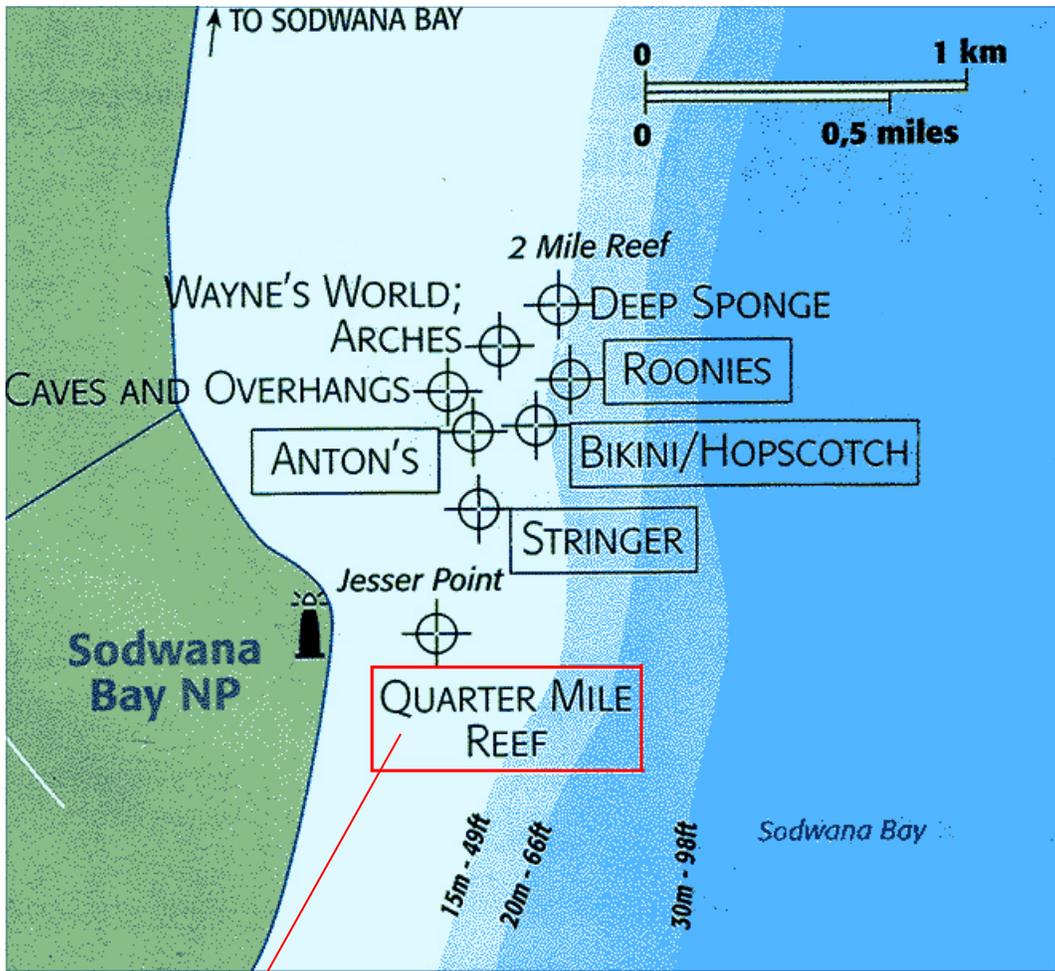
Dr 'Benks' Marais, who examined the diver's body, noted that the width of the bite was 20 to 23 centimetres which conflicts with the measurements made by Walter Pople, Research Officer of the Natal Sharks Board, who recorded that it was 32 centimetres wide and 11 centimetres deep. Pople observed that the deep scrapes on the diver's left foot were indicative of a shark that had widely spaced serrated cutting teeth and commented that the injuries were similar to those inflicted by a white shark on a scalloped hammerhead shark caught in the nets.

FIRST AID: Steenkamp remained lucid and described the attack to Marais, but the injured diver lost consciousness and his wounds stopped bleeding while Marais was bringing him to shore. He wasn't breathing when he was brought ashore. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was started on the beach, but rescuers were unable to revive the diver; apparently he bled to death before he reached the beach.

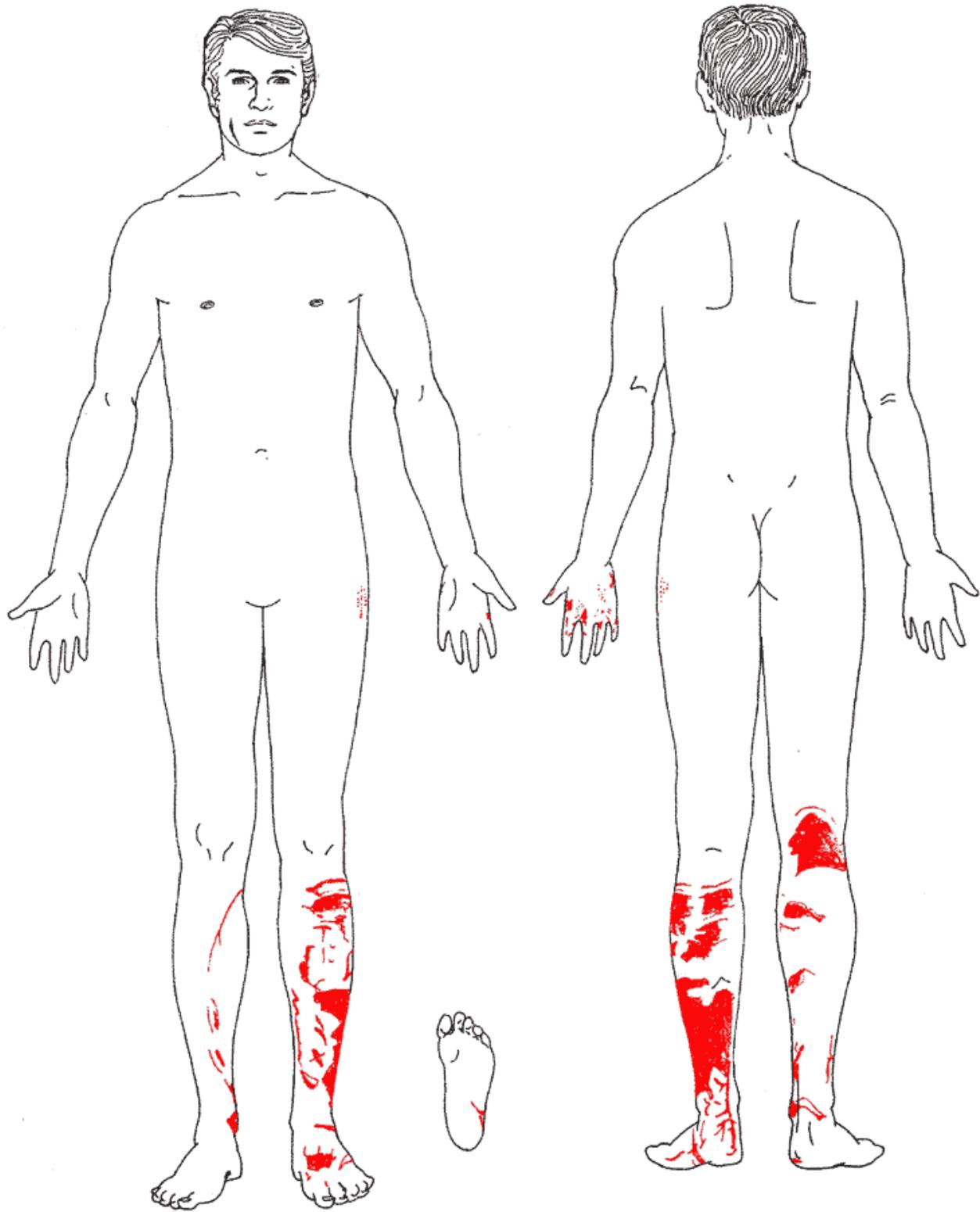
SPECIES INVOLVED: A tooth fragment was recovered from Steenkamp's body by Dr Marais but its whereabouts is unknown. Based on an examination of the wounds, Walter Pople concluded that the accident involved a white shark about 2,3 metres [7.5-feet] in length and weighing between 210 and 220 kilograms.

COMMENT: Anton Marais (Andries Josephus Marais) was awarded the Wolraad Woltemade Medal for conspicuous bravery for his actions during the attack.

SOURCES: Dr. 'Benks' Marais; Dr. M.J. Macdonald; Walter Pople, Natal Sharks Board; Daily News, January 2, 3 & 6, 1978; The Citizen, January 3, 5 & 8, 1978; Natal Mercury, January 3, 4 & 5, 1978; Natal Witness, January 3 & 5, 1978; Cape Argus, January 2 & 3, 1978; East London Daily Dispatch, January 3 & 4, 1978; Eastern Province Herald, January 3 & 5, 1978; Bulawayo Chronicle, January 4 & 6, 1978.



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