

ACTIVITY: Body surfing

CASE: GSAF 1957.12.18 / SA- 117

DATE: Wednesday December 18, 1957

LOCATION: The accident took place at Karridene, a resort 37 kilometres southwest of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Karridene is situated on the northern bank of the Msimbazi River.

30°07'S, 30°51'E

NAME: Robert Wherley

DESCRIPTION: The swimmer, a 16-year-old male, served as an amateur life-saver at Isipingo.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: It was a warm, cloudy day; Durban meteorological station recorded that the air temperature ranged from 19° to 29°C. At 08h30 the sky was overcast with 7/8 cloud cover and light three-knot north-northeasterly airs were noted but by 15h30 the wind had shifted, there was a light six-knot south-south-easterly breeze, and the sky had cleared to 2/8 cloud cover.

MOON PHASE: Third Quarter, December 14, 1957

SEA CONDITIONS: A channel was present and the water was turbid but, according to witnesses, surfing conditions were ideal and, at Durban, the surf temperature measured 22,7°C. The attack occurred two hours after mean high tide and three days before spring tides.

ENVIRONMENT: Karridene is situated on the northern bank of the Msimbazi River mouth. Although the river mouth is usually closed the turbid water indicates that flooding conditions existed and the river mouth may have been open.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: Reports vary: from 30 to 50 metres

DEPTH: 1,2 metres

TIME: 17h00 (Sunset was at 18:54)

NARRATIVE: Robert Wherley and a friend, Tony Duffy, had been body-surfing for about 20 minutes. Fifty to sixty bathers were in the water but Wherley was seawards and to the south of the crowd when he was bitten by the shark. Wherley felt something brush his leg

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and saw a shadow under the sea moving away from him but did not recognize it as a shark until its dorsal fin broke the surface. He saw the shark clearly, however, as it turned and rushed at him. Although he moved sideways to avoid the animal, the shark took him by the left leg at the knee with a “jarring shock” and pulled him under the water. “I surged through the water as it swam with me in its mouth and kicked frantically,” said Wherley. The shark shook him wildly and, as its teeth bit through his leg, Wherley was freed. He attempted to body-surf to shore but lost the wave after a short distance. Only then, when he tried to stand up, did he realize that his leg had been severed. He splashed the water, shouted for help and two men, one of whom was Leon Malherbe, brought him to the beach.

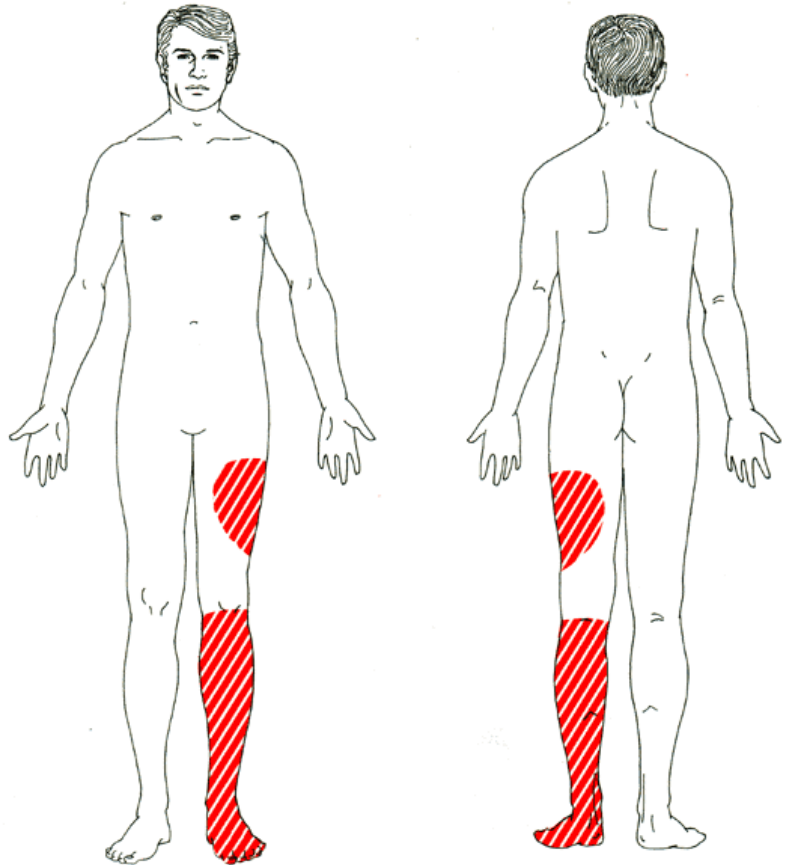
INJURY: Wherley's left leg was severed at the knee and a large portion of his left thigh was removed.

TREATMENT: Wherley was treated at the African Explosives Hospital at Umbogintwini where the remainder of his left leg was surgically amputated. He remained in hospital for three months.

SPECIES INVOLVED: Professor J.L.B. Smith identified the attacker as a raggedtooth shark, *Odontaspis taurus*, but this species does not have the dentition needed to sever human bone; only a shark having heavy serrated teeth could have inflicted the injury. The most likely candidates are a tiger shark, *Galeocerdo cuvier*, or a white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*.

SOURCES: Natal Mercury, December 20, 1957; January 10 & 22 and February 21, 1958; Daily News (Durban), August 8, 1958

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Marie Levine



Boy Alive After Leg Bitten By Shark

20 DEC 1957

THE condition of Robert Wehrley, whose left leg was bitten off by a shark while he was bathing at Karridene late on Wednesday afternoon, was described by his doctor as "satisfactory as can be expected for a person losing a leg from a shark bite."

Sixteen-year-old Robert, of Aylesbury Flats, Amanzimtoti, was rushed to the African Explosives Hospital at Umbogintwini after the shark attack, where a further portion of his left leg was amputated leaving him with a three-inch stump.

This was the first recorded shark attack on a bather in Natal waters since 1954.

The sequence of events leading up to the tragedy was described to "The Natal Mercury" yesterday by one of his swimming companions, Mr. J. L. Callow, also of Amanzimtoti.

He said that he had taken Robert Wehrley, Tony Duffy and Brian Dobson to Karridene for surfing on Wednesday morning. Swimming was ideal and they went again in the afternoon.

WATER CLOUDY

Conditions were again ideal except for the colour of the water which, he said, was slightly cloudy.

Mr. Callow said that at the time of the attack, Tony Duffy and Robert Wehrley were the only two members of their party swimming. He did not know that Robert had been bitten until he was being brought in by two visitors from a nearby camp site who were also in the surf.

One of the visitors, Mr. Leon Malherbe, of Villiers in the Free State, said that he had noticed Robert swimming further out than the rest of the crowd of 50 to 60 swimmers.

He heard Robert's cries for help but thought that he was only fooling. Later when he realised that the calls for help were serious he and another swimmer went to his assistance. They then brought him to the beach where a trained nurse, who was staying at the Karridene Hotel, applied the initial aid to enable him to be moved by car to the hospital.

Mrs. Carl Wehrley, the boy's mother, said yesterday that when she had seen Robert in the hospital he had told her that when the shark came in to attack him he thought of fighting it.

It took him by the left leg at the knee joint and pulled him under the water. As he was being pulled down he kicked wildly and suddenly found himself free. Then he realised that his leg had been bitten off.

Onlookers at the beach said that although the bone of the lower leg had been removed at the knee, a large part of the flesh of the upper leg had also been removed. Robert, they said, did not lose consciousness until he arrived at the hospital.

First Shark Victim Out Of Hospital

ROBERT WHERLEY, the 16-year-old Technical College mechanical engineering student, and first shark attack victim, left hospital on Friday and is now convalescing at his parents' flat in Arbuthnot Street, Amanzimtoti.

Looking well and happy he was practising walking up and down steps on his crutches when I met him yesterday.

He will be back at his desk when the new Technical College opens on January 21, and hopes to go into Standard VIII.

Bob's great ambition is to get back into the surf, but his doctor has barred him from bathing for at least three months.

KEEN TO SWIM

He told me that he wanted to swim to the nets laid yesterday off Inyoni Rocks for an inspection of the buoys. "I would not say that I have no fear of sharks, and I shall probably keep on the right side of the nets," he added.

Bob denied reports that he had lost consciousness when he reached the shore after a shark attacked him at Karridene on the afternoon of December 18.

He said that he lost consciousness only when he was anaesthetised after arrival at hospital. "They pumped me full of antibiotics, before obtaining my father's permission to operate."

PAIN IN LEG

He still has a lot of pain in his leg—but not in the stump. The pain comes from the nerves of his missing toes and heel.

"Sometimes the pain is constant, sometimes merely nagging, but what nearly drives me crazy is the itching of my toes which I know are not there."

Bob has not been approached officially yet by the visitor who was reported to have seen the Mayor of Amanzimtoti, Mr. A. Howse, offering to send Wherley to university to train as a diesel engineer.

He has had the offer of a job and training from a firm of Durban engineers. "If I do get that offer to go to university I will take it like a shot," he said.



MR. LEON MALHERBE, of Villiers, in the Free State, who is at present on a camping holiday at Karridene on the Natal South Coast and who was one of the swimmers who helped Robert Wehrley to the beach after he had been attacked by a shark.

Father's Thanks

Sir,—I wish sincerely to thank on behalf of my wife and myself all those who so generously made the Amanzimtoti "Put Bob Back On His Feet" Fund the success it was. The Rugby Club, the hotels of Amanzimtoti, the visitors and well-wishers from all over the country who sent in donations.

I particularly wish to thank the organisers who launched the effort and the Amanzimtoti Mayor who worked with him and sponsored the fund.

We sincerely thank them all.

C. B. WEHRLEY.

Aylesbury Flats,
Amanzimtoti.

UNIVERSITY OFFER FOR WHERLEY

As a result of a photograph and report of an interview with Robert Wherley, the first shark victim, which appeared in "The Natal Mercury," the Mayor of Amanzimtoti, Mr. Arthur Howse, was approached by a visitor to the resort with an offer to send Wherley to university to train as a Diesel engineer.

Robert Wherley, who had hoped to become a Diesel mechanic, had stated that because of the loss of his leg in the shark attack he would have to choose some other career.

He expressed the wish to go to university.

Mr. Howse introduced the boy to his well-wisher and they have had their first interview.

Another outcome of the photograph and report was a cheque for £25 from a Port Elizabeth benefactor. This amount will also go towards providing the boy with an artificial limb—something he anticipated being fitted for.



11 JAN 1958

Moths to aid shark victim

The Moths of the Picardy-Bazooka Shellhole, Amanzimtoti have decided that all the money raised at the opening night of their pantomime, "Aladdin," will be given to Bob Wherley, who lost his leg when he fought off a shark in the surf at Karridene last month.

The pantomime, produced by Hill Hicken from a script by Doreen Pritchard, opens in Amanzimtoti on Saturday afternoon at the Moth Hall.

The opening night charity performance is next Tuesday. The cast hopes for a packed house as they feel Amanzimtoti has a special interest in 16-year-old Bob Wherley, whose home is in the village.

Further performances of "Aladdin" will take place on Thursday (January 16), and Friday (January 17).

The show will be presented at Scottburgh on January 20, and at Umbogintwini on January 25.