

## August 16, 2001 – Grand Bahama Island Bull Shark Encounter

It was August, 2001. My Wife and I were coming up on the tail end of a 10-day vacation on Grand Bahama Island. We were staying with Reg Boer and Barbara Hensby, friends of ours from Australia, who were looking after famed North Riding Point Club, a private bone fishing club located approximately 30 miles east of Freeport. The Club was closed for the month for annual maintenance and Ben and Judy Rose, who managed the facility, were away on vacation. We had the place to ourselves. We spent our days exploring the island, scuba diving, spearing fish and lazing around the pool. On August 16, the weather began to change, clouds and rain moved in and the wind began to pick up. Until then, we had pristine, flat calm conditions. It was late morning when the rain finally let up. Barb had been experiencing flu-like symptoms since the day before and was not up to doing anything other than staying in bed. That left the three of us to decide what we were going to do. We decided to go out and shoot some fish for dinner.

We hooked up the boat trailer to the Bronco, loaded our gear and headed on our way to the boat ramp, which was located about five miles up the street on the site of an abandoned U.S. Radar listening station, near High Rock. Once we put the boat in the water, we ran out about two miles from shore. We stopped in close vicinity to an area where the day before we had two large bull sharks right under the boat. As Barb was usually our designated boat tender, Deb volunteered to do the tending, which involved snorkeling and towing the boat along, while Reg and I would hunt. Due to the healthy shark population in the area, we took certain precautions so as not to attract them and not to get bitten. One person would be in the water pulling the boat, while the others would stay close to the boat and hunt. Once a fish was speared, the person would hold the fish out of the water and



hand it up to the boat-tower to put in the cooler on the boat. The important thing was staying close to the boat. On that day, things didn't work out as planned. The first thing we noticed was an absence of fish, whereas every other day, we were seeing fish everywhere. Since we had a healthy breeze and a surface chop, Deb was having a hard time keeping up with Reg and I, as we would stray further away for the boat in search of prey. I kept getting an earful about staying close to the boat, if not I'd have to be the one towing the boat. We finally came across an interesting reef head and spotted a 10lb Nassau grouper in about 12 feet of water. Reg dropped down and tagged the fish. It pulled off the shaft and

holed up under a coral head. I went down and shot the fish, but it still managed to pull away, emitting a series of grunting sounds typical of alarmed grouper and a dinner call to any sharks cruising the area.

After it was apparent the grouper was staying put, we gave up and resumed our hunt. After a while of seeing absolutely nothing, I finally saw about a 5lb hog fish grazing in the sand. I began stalking the fish, but it sensed my presence and took off. I could sense the fish was already alarmed, as hogs are usually unsuspecting fish until you actually take a shot and miss. I remember thinking this as being strange behavior as no one else was working



the area, except of course Reg, but he was well on the other side of the boat. As this was a good size fish and the only one I had seen in about two hours of snorkeling, I took off in pursuit, realizing I was getting further and further away from the boat. The fish finally slowed when it came up to this really nice reef area, filled with large coral heads and sea fans. I was in about 15 feet of water. I looked up out of the water to see if I could get Debbie's attention to bring the boat over to where I was, but at that point she was about 100 feet away. I decided to resume the hunt. Upon putting my face back in the water, it took me a second to spot my fish, which had returned to grazing a sandy patch next to the reef. I was about to dive down and take a shot, when I spotted a huge male hog fish coming over the reef to join the other one. This fish had to be every bit of 12-15 lbs. I couldn't believe my luck. I came back up for air, relaxed my breathing, took a deep breath and dropped down on the fish. I took the shot from less than three feet away; hitting the fish in the head with what I thought was a perfect kill shot. I guess, because of its size, the fish was able to manage a last swim across the sand to the cover of a large lone coral head. Before I surfaced, I could see the tail of the fish and my spear shaft protruding from under the coral head. Having been underwater for over a minute, I had to surface. It was then it dawned on me how far away I was from the boat and that potentially I had put myself in a very dangerous predicament. Unfortunately ego prevailed over common sense. I dove back down for my prize. The fish had lodged itself under the coral. Yet, I managed to grab it by the gills and work it out together with my spear shaft. There was fish blood everywhere. Holding the spear shaft with my left hand and the fish with my right, I headed for the surface. The next thing I felt was a major impact to my left calf - sort of like getting hit by car. The impact spun me around. The next thing I realized, I had the flank of what was determined to be an 8ft bull

shark in my face. Instinctively, I released the spear and the fish and pushed off the shark, which got me the rest of the way to the surface. My first thought was “don’t hit me again.” I remember there was so much blood on the surface and swirling around me, I thought for sure I was going to be bitten again. I then looked down and saw that my entire calf was gone. I could see bone. My fear was that the artery had been hit. I looked for the boat and seeing how far I was, realized that if it was an artery, my time was up. I started to swim for the boat, figuring I would at least die trying to make it.

I got to within 50 feet of the boat, which is when, despite the massive adrenaline rush, I started to get light-headed. I started calling for Debbie to help me. Not wanting to alarm her more than necessary, I started shouting that I needed a hand. In the back of my mind, I knew she must have been royally pissed off at me for getting

She looked up and started me, asking holding your water?” “What you need a shouted that I hit by a shark. the initial what I said go of the tow out me. I still



so far away. from snorkeling yelling back at “why aren’t you fish out of the do you mean hand?” I finally had been hit – I could sense hesitation as sunk in. Deb let rope and swam remember how

wide her eyes got once she got within eyesight of my leg underwater. I could almost sense that she was thinking what I was thinking right after I got hit – that whatever got me was still after me. Yet, she immediately grabbed me by the arm and started towing me back to the boat, which by this time had been carried another 80 feet away by the wind. Once to the boat, I managed to hoist myself halfway up the small step ladder and flop halfway into the boat. Deb had to push me in the rest of the way and helped get me situated in front of the console. The boat looked like the scene of the Texas chainsaw massacre, there was blood everywhere. It was then Debbie remarked that half my leg looked like it was gone. Interestingly, my adrenaline level was such that I wasn’t feeling much pain, just enormous pressure. I told her to calm down and instructed her to grab a bunch of dive skins we had laying around the boat. I had her wad them into a big ball, which we then wedged into the wound as an improvised pressure bandage. I told her I would maintain pressure on the leg, while she should start the boat to go pick up Reg, who by this time was about as far away as I was when I got hit.

Once in the boat, Reg assessed the wound, determining that luckily the bleeding was not arterial. (It was a dark burgundy color as opposed bright red). Deb took over my wound care, elevating the leg and clamping down to apply direct

pressure over the wound – everything we've ever learned in first aid classes came into play. You just never imagine you're going to use it on yourself. Reg ran the boat as fast as it would go. Luckily he knew the waters as well as he did. Anyone else would have torn the bottom out of the boat by running it aground on one of the many coral heads lying just below the surface. Laying in the boat, I remember looking up at the sky and thinking that I didn't want to die.

Reg beached the boat next to the boat ramp. A Bahamian and his family had set up for a picnic and some fishing where we pulled in. Reg got him to help pick me up out of the boat and put me in the back of the Bronco. Before they lifted me out, I told Deb to pull all our dive gear together. She thought I was crazy, but I insisted, so she complied just to keep me quiet. It was then I finally passed out. I came to with Deb shaking me by the shoulder telling me to wake up. It was like coming out of a deep sleep. I didn't know where I was or why she was trying to wake me. It was when she reminded me that I had been attacked by a shark that it all came flooding back and my leg started throbbing big time. Deb climbed in the back of the Bronco with me and continued to apply direct pressure to the leg. Reg unhitched the trailer, leaving the boat at the beach, climbed in and put the Bronco into gear - our destination, Rand Memorial Hospital in Freeport, 35 miles away. The ride was a memorable one. The roadway was festooned with bomb crater-sized pot holes – we hit them all at about 65 miles per hour and our tail gate was down, leaving the spare tire to swing out into oncoming traffic every time we went around a corner. Luckily there was no traffic coming the other way. Reg pulled into the Club where we were staying to roust Barb out of bed to call the hospital to dispatch an ambulance. We then got back on the road. The ambulance passed us going the opposite direction about five miles from Freeport. Both Reg and the ambulance driver realized at the same time and stopped. Once I was in the ambulance, the paramedic was ready to apply what he thought was appropriate first aid – he had two 4" gauze pads in hand and wanted to see my wound. I asked him what he was planning to do with those. His reply was that it was for my leg. At that point I had Deb drop the makeshift bandage and the paramedic went chalk white. I instructed him to leave the dive skins in place and asked him if he had any ace bandages onboard. I then had him wrap the skins in place so that Deb could finally take a long-deserved break. Reg left to go back to the Club to pick up Barb.

As the ambulance got underway, we were surprised to see that we had a full police motorcycle escort and that every traffic intersection we passed through was manned by police units to clear our way through. We subsequently found out that this was due to the fact that we were staying at the North Riding Point Club, whose guests typically include foreign dignitaries, heads of state and other celebrities. It made for a fast ride. Upon reaching the hospital, the ambulance was surrounded by a throng of media. I remember seeing a CNN camera, where upon I instructed Deb to call my family overseas to let them know I was Okay. My Dad lives on a diet of CNN and FOX News 24 hours a day, so I didn't want him to

get a nasty surprise when he turned the TV on first thing in the morning, Brussels time.

It was about 5 PM when I arrived in the emergency room, almost an hour-and-a-half from the time of my accident. I was pleasantly surprised by a very professional and capable staff of emergency personnel. My blood pressure was virtually non-existent and at that point I was in and out of consciousness. The team cleaned and dressed the wound site and got me hooked up to an intravenous feed to bring my fluid levels back up. Once I was stabilized, we were informed I was to be airlifted to Miami via air ambulance service. It was after hours though and the Hospital's administrator could not get in touch with my health care insurance provider. We were informed that unless we could provide a credit card, we would have to wait till the following day to get me out. By this time, Reg and Barb had arrived at the hospital and suspecting we would be flying home, had packed some of our belongings including wallets and passports. In the meantime, other friends living in Freeport had also shown up, providing Deb with a towel and tee-shirt, as she was still only clad in a bathing suit and sarong. Deb produced a credit card and within a short while we were informed that an air ambulance service had been dispatched from Nassau.

Shortly before we left for the airport, we were visited by a representative from the Ministry of Tourism, who wanted to insure that I was being taken care of. Unfortunately, I was the second shark victim in the Bahamas in less than two weeks. Prior to that, there hadn't been a recorded shark in Grand Bahama in more than fifty years. Not good for the island's publicity. The previous victim had lost his leg while swimming off the Lucaya Resort's beach. I also assured her that we blamed no one for my accident except myself and that we would be back to enjoy Bahamian hospitality once I was better.

It was around 8:00 PM when they started getting me ready for the ride to the airport. The ride in the gurney from the hospital entrance to the ambulance was like running a gauntlet. We were surrounded by a throng of hospital staff, police, media correspondents and curious onlookers. Again we had a motorcade of police vehicles leading and following the ambulance. At the airport, the ambulance was directed onto the tarmac. The plane was a twin engine Piper Navajo Chieftain. Loading me into the aircraft was challenging as the doorway was narrow and the passenger compartment barely large enough to accommodate two medical personnel, Deb and myself. The plane lifted off at 9:00 PM en route for Miami International Airport.

We landed at 10 PM. The plane taxied to the back of the airport, where another ambulance was waiting to run me the final leg to Jackson Memorial Ryder Trauma Center. Once we were cleared by a customs and immigration officer, we were on our way. Again we were greeted by a throng of media, trying to get statements from Deb and the ambulance crew. It was 10:45 PM when I was finally admitted into a triage unit. It was then in the back of my mind that I knew I

was going to be Okay. It was also then that something else clicked that told me it was about time to start feeling pain. It kicked in with a vengeance, especially when the doctors started removing the dressings and exposed the wound. I remember asking them to shoot me or put me out, which ever was faster.

There was little in the way that could be done for the wound when I first came in, as there was nothing that could be stitched up. The shark had bitten me with near-surgical precision, leaving an 8" classic half-moon hole where my left calf once was.

The jagged edges were trimmed and cauterized and the bleeding stopped.

Dr Patricia Byers, the chief attending physician

remarked that everything we did was credited with saving my life.

The long swim actually irrigated and cleansed the wound, which is

most likely why I didn't develop a major infection. The reason I didn't lose the leg was because we knew not to apply a tourniquet. Had we done so, I would have irreparably compromised circulation to my lower leg.



I spent the next six weeks in the hospital undergoing extensive and very painful treatment and rehabilitation.

The treatment involved a high protein diet, which wasn't the bad part. The bad part was the de-breeding of the wound on a daily basis, which caused the wound to bleed and generate new tissue. In non-medical terms, this would be the equivalent of ripping a large band-aid off



the hairiest part of your body with a pain factor times a million. Even the morphine wouldn't mask the pain of the procedure. I'd do a shark bite again before experiencing that kind of pain. Rehabilitation involved learning how to walk again, a feat the doctors weren't sure I'd be able to accomplish without some residual loss of mobility. My goal was to prove them wrong, which today I'm happy to say I managed to do.



Worth mentioning, shortly after my arrival at the hospital, I was paid a visit by Krishna Thompson and his family. As indicated earlier, Krishna was the first accident victim in the Bahamas, two weeks before my situation. He and his wife had been staying at Our Lucaya Resort in Freeport. He went for an early morning swim, when he got hit. The shark stripped his lower leg to the knee, severing his femoral artery. Due to the irreparable damage, he had to have his leg amputated. Krishna was also flown out to Ryder Trauma Center and was nearing the end of his recovery when he came into visit me. Krishna and his wife had since filed a lawsuit against the hotel, claiming that the life guards failed to react quickly enough and that signs should have been posted warning bathers of shark feeding activity in the area. They quizzed me about my experience, no doubt in search for

additional ammunition for their law suit. I told them, much to their amazement, that they had no grounds for a law suit, based on the fact that nobody can be blamed for either of our misfortunes, not the shark, not Our Lucaya Resort (in Krishna's case) and certainly not interactive shark feeding operations which were no where close to where I was and more than a mile from where Krishna got hit. The simple fact is that these attacks could have happened anywhere, for after all, sharks inhabit the world's oceans, not just Bahamian waters. Attacks, albeit rare, are nothing more than random incidents of mistaken identity and contrary to popular belief; we are not part of their diet. I never heard from or saw the Thompsons again. I subsequently found out from the Hospital's staff that Krishna Thompson worked as an investment banker and had it not been for his shark accident, he would have certainly perished in the 9/11 attacks, as his office was located on one of the upper floors of the World Trade Center. He was home convalescing at the time the twin towers came down.

At the same time of the 9/11 attacks, I was undergoing skin graft surgery to close the wound. I was going on my fourth week in the hospital, when I was told that enough tissue had regenerated in the wound to provide a smooth enough surface to lay the new skin which would be harvested from my upper thigh.

Twenty minutes into the surgery, the first plane hit the World Trade Center. When it was determined that the attacks were an act of terrorism, the hospital went into a state of alert. All non-life threatening procedures were temporarily interrupted, mine included. What should have been a forty five minute operation turned into three hours. Later the next morning, after the anesthetics had worn off, I thought I had dreamt of planes flying into buildings. The dreams had seemed so real. What happened was, CNN was on in my hospital room and I guess every so often, I would wake up and absorb what was going on before falling back asleep. I was shocked as was everyone else, when I realized the enormity of what had happened in New York City. Shark attacks and the Gary Condit scandal, which were the focus of every day headline news the whole summer long, suddenly faded from public interest.

I was released from the hospital toward the end of September. Until that point, we had avoided any communication with the media. As avid divers with a deep understanding and respect for the ocean, we didn't want to add to all the senseless hysteria surrounding the so called "Summer of the Shark", which as it turns out wasn't. The night after I had arrived at the hospital and Deb finally went home, she found a news van parked at our doorstep. She promptly called the police to forcibly escort them out of the neighborhood. While in the hospital, we had all sorts of opportunities to go on national television. We declined and the hospital did a remarkable job of keeping the press at bay. The day I was discharged, we agreed to do a press conference, where we praised the hospital staff and recounted our story. I think everyone was quite disappointed when we told them that the shark wasn't to blame.

Two months out the hospital, thanks to an aggressive rehabilitation program, coupled with my own work-out routine, I recovered full mobility of my leg. I was able to walk normally, with only the slightest trace of a limp. It was also around then; we got a call from the Discovery Channel, to see if we would be interested in telling our story. In December, we filmed a re-enactment of the events for Discovery's Shark Week series. It was the first time Discovery had used the actual people involved to do the re-enactment. We insisted that we play ourselves. The filming took place in Walker's Cay, where we had the incredible opportunity to work with Gary Adkison, who established the shark diving program



on the island and Dr. Erich Ritter, who specializes in shark behavior. We spent hours in the water with a large congregation of some very big bull and lemon sharks and not once did we feel threatened. The only reason we agreed to be a part of this documentary, was that we wanted to convey the message that sharks are to be respected and not feared. As Erich points out, there

is no such thing as a “Shark Attack”, which would denote that the shark’s actions were intentional, premeditated events aimed at humans. Incidents involving sharks and humans are nothing more than accidents that we, as the smarter species, should be able to avoid. If we enter their domain, we need to take responsibility for our own actions and take the necessary precautions so as not to become another shark statistic for the media to prey on.



## **RETROSPECTIVE**

Between the time I spent in the hospital and now, I have revisited my accident countless times. What could I have done to prevent it? What should we have done differently? Were there any warning signs? Are sharks in fact attracted by blood or by something else? These are among the many questions, I have tried to answer.

Given our respective levels of experience around the water, we all agree that I broke protocol. I got too far away from the boat. Bull sharks are highly competitive, especially when it comes to nutrient. It is likely the shark perceived me as a competitor, hunting for its same food source, which in this case was the fish I had just speared. Bulls are also sneak attackers, hitting from behind, outside of its victim’s field of vision. Most documented bull shark attacks involve posterior extremities, as was the situation in my case. The shark never broke stride after it bit me; it came straight up for my fish which of course I let it have. Had the bite severed an artery, I would never have made it back to the boat alive. As it was, I was lucky to make it as far as I did, further making a case for staying close to the boat at all times.

Interestingly enough, considering the thick trail of blood I left in my wake back to the boat, not a single other shark showed up, which certainly, in my opinion, casts doubt on the age-old theory that sharks are attracted to human blood.

There is instead ample evidence that sharks are attracted by electrical impulses emitted by startled or wounded fish, which is most likely what attracted the shark in my case. Earlier, I mentioned that the day before we had two large bulls under boat. Bull sharks are highly territorial, especially if there is plenty of nutrient around. The day of my accident, we were working an area less than a quarter of a mile away from where we saw the sharks the previous day. If this wasn't a good enough reason to consider going elsewhere, we should have been more concerned with the fact that there was a noticeable absence of fish in the area. Plus the visibility compared to previous days was murky, lending greater cover to any sharks in the area.

Lastly, if you are spearfishing in an area with a healthy shark population, you need to be prepared in the event an accident does occur. It's probably a good idea to be up on first aid basics - particularly in wound and shock management. If spearfishing from a boat, maintain a good first aid or trauma kit on board and make sure to have some means of communication, such as a VHF radio (hand-held or fixed) and/or a cell phone to call for help. In our case, we were using a small 15' skiff with none of these items on board. Luckily, we all had some degree of medical training and were able to improvise. As indicated earlier, our actions were credited for saving my life.

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