
How It Feels to Be Food

Attacked by a great white one

I am a 31-year-old diver, certified as an NOAA working diver. I've logged 300 dives throughout California, the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Mediterranean, the Arctic Ocean, and Cape Horn. I am the proprietor of Desert Star Systems, a small company that produces oceanographic equipment.

I just survived an attack by a great white shark. This is my account, to the best of my recollection, written 44 hours after the attack.

Two friends, Steve and Marcie, had heard about the good diving conditions at Point Lobos State Park, near Monterey, California, and invited me to dive with them. On June 30, 1995, at 5:30 p.m., we anchored our Zodiac in 90 feet of water outside Bluefish Cove. The surface was flat with no swell; the subdued late-afternoon light was further dimmed by clouds. Underwater, rocky outcroppings were interspersed with sandy channels, with kelp nearby.

I was trying out Steve's diver propulsion vehicle (scooter), descending at approximately a 20-degree angle. Two minutes into the dive and 50 feet down in the murky water, I looked to my right and saw, 20 feet away at the limit of visibility, a huge pectoral fin attached to a torpedo-shaped body. Two seconds later the fish disappeared from view. The five-

I looked below me and saw the wide-open, tooth-lined mouth of a shark coming at me. "Oh, shit," I thought.

foot section I saw did not include the dorsal fin or any forward part of the animal.

Stunned, I realized that this fish matched the shape and size

of a great white shark. I hoped it was just passing by and would not attack me, but immediately turned the scooter and started towards the boat, ascending at a slight angle, trying not to provoke an air embolism by surfacing too fast. I was alert and apprehensive, but still calm enough to think, "I got to see it without paying for a shark diving trip."

Twenty seconds later, I looked below me to see the wide-open, tooth-lined mouth of a shark coming at me. It was two to three feet across. I thought, "Oh, shit." Then I felt a severe but dull pressure on my body.

I don't remember being shaken by the animal. Nor do I remember taking any evasive or defensive action. But after two or three seconds — hard to recall — I found myself free from its hold. I thought, "It didn't bite so hard."

I wondered if my legs were still there. Yes, I could feel them. I started toward the boat again, at maximum speed. I stayed underwater to avoid surfacing too quickly and thrashing about on the surface, which might cause the shark to bite again.

I came up 20 yards from my goal. I dropped the scooter rather than wrestling it into the boat. I made two or three unsuccessful attempts to climb into the Zodiac with full dive gear, then jettisoned my weight belt and removed my tank. I finally managed to get into the boat. When I tried to pull in my gear, I fell into the water. I

A Double Tragedy

Southern California. He had also recently purchased the California-based publication *Dive Boat Calendar*.

The details are still unknown, but it appears that Darren attempted to aid a diver who had shot to the surface as they were trying to raise an anchor from the wreck. Once on the surface, he realized that his son was not there, and returned to find him. Darren, 38, is survived by his wife Stacey and four children.

Darren Douglass and his 14-year-old son died while diving the 140-foot-deep wreck of the *Moody*, located seven miles off Long Beach, California. Darren was the author of *Guide to Shipwreck Diving of*

climbed back in as quickly as I could, started the engine in neutral, and revved it in short bursts to warn Steve and Marcie. I felt a dull pain in my gut, but figured that since I was still conscious, I had probably not lost a lot of blood.

Five minutes later, Steve surfaced 30 feet away and I told him I had been attacked. He handed me his video camera (which fell back into the water along with the weight belt it was attached to) and climbed into the boat. We kept revving the engine to signal Marcie, who surfaced after a few more minutes.

Once we made it to shore, I climbed out of the boat on my own, but felt so weak I had to sit down. The ambulance came within a few minutes; the paramedics removed my wet suit, loaded me into the ambulance, and took me to the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula.

I had a wound about 1¾ inches in diameter on my left forearm (six stitches), with a 1-inch scrape mark nearby. I needed another eight stitches to close a cut on my left upper leg, and two stitches for a cut next to a bruise on my left lower abdomen. The distance from the leg wound to the arm wound is 20 inches if my arm is down, 30 inches if I raise my arm at a 45-degree angle while standing. I don't recall which position my arm was in when the shark bit, but the fact that I was using the scooter suggests that it was up.

When I was attacked, I was wearing a ¼-inch, black-and-blue wet suit and a yellow-and-orange weight belt. My instrument console, a DiveTracker DTX (a product of my company) is housed in an 8-inch-long alumi-

num box with ¼-inch-thick walls. There are two gashes in the plastic label of my DiveTracker and there are tooth marks on the back of the steel tank.

Perhaps being sandwiched between two layers of metal saved me by spreading the force of the bite over a large area.

Considering the great white's size, why were my injuries so minor? Perhaps being sandwiched

between the steel tank on my back and the aluminum DiveTracker in front saved me. My wounds may simply have been points where my body bulged out between the armor.

It is impossible to tell from a single incident why a shark chooses to attack. I suspect I just happened to run across the path of a hungry shark. One might argue that it was the color of this or that piece of gear or the noise of the scooter that provoked the attack.

I will not be deterred from diving off California. Statistics show that the probability of being attacked by a shark is very low — even with my experience added in.

Marco Flagg

I knew that nurse sharks are docile, non-threatening beasts unless cornered or tail-yanked. What I didn't know until I read Richard Martin's *Shark Smart* was that nurse sharks are capable of unprovoked attacks on divers.

"Motivation of unprovoked nurse shark attacks on divers is unclear. . . . In one bizarre, unprovoked attack, a large nurse shark grabbed a diver's chest with its teeth, then appeared to hold onto his body with his pectoral fins; unfortunately, the sex of the shark was not recorded. Although its teeth are small, the jaws and associated muscles are extremely powerful. . . . In some instances, nurse sharks have bitten people and have held on — even as the victim was removed from the water."

Shark Smart: The Diver's Guide to Understanding Shark Behavior is written for divers, not marine scientists. The easy-reading text covers most of the sharks commonly found in the Caribbean, with details of interest to divers, such as identification and behavior. Additional sections cover shark stories, photographing sharks, motivation of shark attacks, and reducing risks.

While some of the information may be old hat to experienced divers, I found the identification profiles to be useful information. I already have a new respect for those 12-foot-long nurse sharks I see so often in Belize.

Shark Smart is self-published and can be had by sending a check or money order for \$14.95 plus \$5 shipping and handling to Richard Martin, 310-170 East 3rd St., North Vancouver, BC V7L 1E6, Canada. To order multiple copies for retail, or for more information, fax 604-980-2121.

Get Shark Smart

J. Q.