

# Attack of the Sharks

Panic swept over the New Jersey and New York coast. It had come under attack—from sharks! In a span of less than two weeks during the month of July 1916, close to 100 years ago, five shark attacks occurred along the New Jersey shore. Four of the victims died and the fifth was seriously injured. Beaches lay empty as swimmers stayed far away fearing the danger that lurked beneath the waves. In the end, they caught the killer shark... or did they?



- Chaim Rivkin





It was a hot summer day on July 1, 1916. In Europe, it would be called “the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army,” the first day of the Battle of the Somme, which would claim the lives 20,000 British soldiers and the wounding of another 40,000. In America, though, the “Great War” was no more than a distant reality. Here Americans were preoccupied with the effects of the relentless hot weather.

The sun baked down mercilessly on the hapless residents of New Jersey. No one could recall such an intense heat. At least one man died that day and a number of others fainted from the effects of heatstroke. Air conditioners were not yet in existence and many factories were forced to close early due to the extreme temperature.



Great white shark, the most dangerous species of shark.



A school of sharks on the prowl.

At Beach Haven, a resort town off the southern coast of New Jersey, the ocean’s cool waves lapped temptingly at the shore. Drove of people were attracted to the refreshing relief of a swim in the ocean’s waters. Among the many people at the New Jersey beach that day was 25-year-old Charles Vansant. Vansant and his father, visiting from Philadelphia, were staying at a nearby hotel. With evening approaching, Charles decided to catch a quick swim before dinner. His dog followed him.

Vansant was an experienced swimmer and within moments he was swimming far from the shore. At first his dog followed obediently, but then it suddenly spun around and paddled furiously back toward the beach. Vansant called to his dog, encouraging it to come back, but to no avail. The dog was determined to return to dry land.

Then, Vansant himself began swimming back to shore. He was still 50 feet out when people on the beach noticed a dark shadow in the water. It was bearing down swiftly on Vansant from behind. Cries of “Watch out!” were heard from several sides.

But Vansant did not hear the warnings.

Suddenly, he felt a powerful tug from behind. A large, flattened head appeared briefly above the water, its gaping mouth full of razor-sharp teeth.

Eyewitnesses on the beach heard Vansant’s shrieks just before he suddenly disappeared beneath the waves. All that remained was a blotch of crimson floating on the water.

A lifeguard, Alexander Ott, dove into the water. He cut through the waves with swift, forceful strokes and quickly swam to the spot where Vansant had last been seen. Ott was joined by bystander Sheridan Taylor.

Then they saw Vansant’s body. Nearby, an unknown creature, estimated at 10 feet long and shaped like a torpedo, circled beneath the waves. Ott pulled Vansant back to shore with the attacker following in tow. As they pulled an unconscious and bloody Vansant into the shallow waters the creature disappeared back into sea.

Charles Vansant’s father was a doctor.

But there was little that medicine could do. The wounds were too pervasive for any relief to be effective. An hour later Vansant was dead, the first victim of a wave of shark attacks that would plague the New Jersey coast that summer of 1916.

## Shark?

News of Vansant’s death made the front page of the newspapers. “Dies After Attack By Fish,” read the headline of the next day’s *New York Times*. Still, people were not unduly frightened. It was an isolated incident, an example of the potential danger inherent when swimming in the open sea.

Although Vansant had clearly been killed by some sort of sea creature, exactly what type of creature had attacked him was not known. While some people naturally assumed it was a shark, others were skeptical. Who had ever before heard of a shark attacking a swimmer along the northeastern coast?

Scientists were in agreement then (and they remain so today) that sharks generally did not attack humans for no reason. The State Fish Commissioner of Pennsylvania, James M. Meehan, told the media that Vansant was probably not attacked by a man-eating shark. Even if it had been a shark, he added, it was likely small and had come to attack the dog, not Vansant. Meehan specifically emphasized that sharks posed no threat to humans.

For the next few days some swimmers took extra precautions, checking the water every few minutes for signs of something unusual. Other than that, there was no change. Beachgoers continued to enjoy the refreshing coolness of the Atlantic Ocean. The resort hotels and restaurants remained at full capacity as vacationers continued to swarm to the New Jersey beach.

In Spring Lake, 30 miles from Beach Haven, the local newspaper *Asbury Park Press* questioned whether Vansant had been attacked by a fish at all. Perhaps he had simply drowned and the rest of the story was the product of someone’s fantasies. But



Not for the fainthearted: underwater tourists come face-to-face with sharks.



For the less courageous, a hotel in Las Vegas, like many aquariums, offers patrons an opportunity to meet sharks from behind a safe, thick glass wall.

it was in Spring Lake that the truth behind the shark attack was first confirmed.

It was July 6, five days after Vansant’s death. An employee of Spring Lake’s Essex and Sussex Hotel, 27-year-old Charles Bruder, went to the beach for his usual afternoon dip. Bruder was a good swimmer. He often bragged that back in California he had swum among sharks and was not afraid of them. Now he quickly swam 400 feet out into the ocean.

The shark attacked Bruder before he knew what hit him, and he quickly disappeared under the water. A frightened beachgoer pointed to the spot where Bruder had disappeared. Mistaking the dark red mark, he