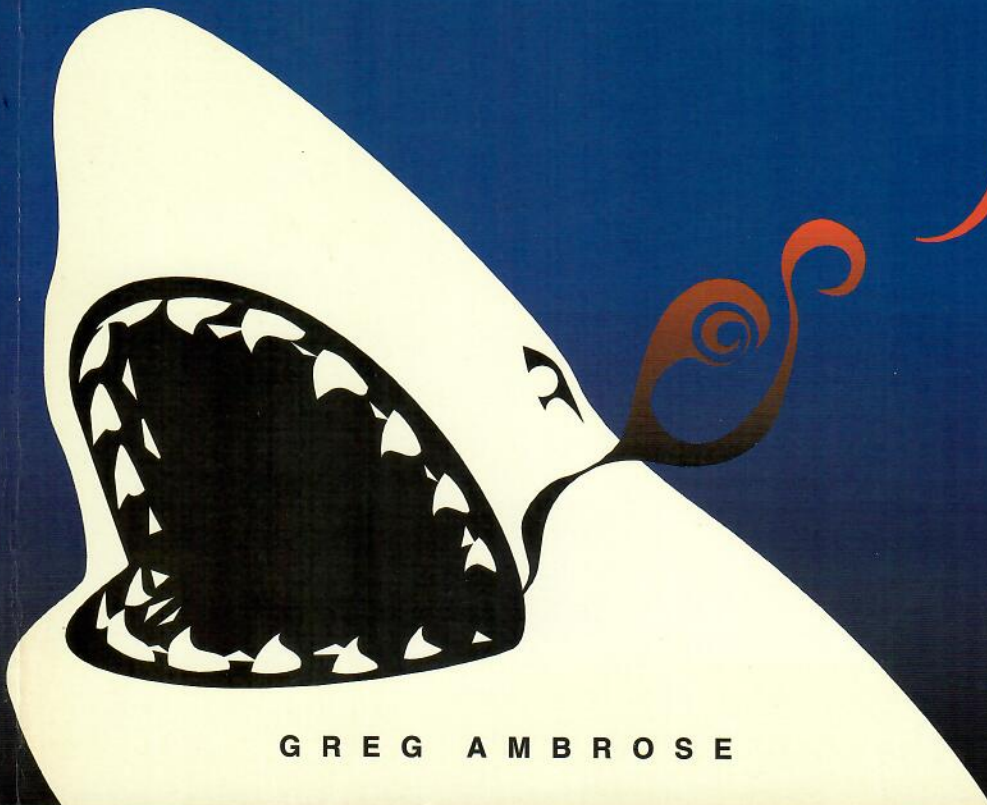


# SHARK BITES

TRUE TALES OF SURVIVAL



GREG AMBROSE

the nose, but do that to a freight train."

By the time Alan dried off and wrapped a towel around his lacerated hand and another around his bloody ribs, a military helicopter had quickly covered the forty miles from Kwajalein. The medics put Alan on a stretcher, and he savored the rest as they flew him to Kwajalein, carried him to an ambulance and finally rolled him into the hospital.

The emergency call ended the doctor's Sunday rest, and he hurried to the hospital to dose Alan with painkillers and begin three hours of dexterous sewing to repair Alan's wounds.

The only permanent damage was a severed tendon that required follow-up surgery and left one finger unable to straighten completely. Alan is constantly reminded of the attack by a series of fascinating scars on his ribs and hand, one of which has extended his lifeline.

He also has a keen appreciation for his good luck.

"I was amazed it didn't hit more nerves and tendons. I really think I was extremely fortunate that every time the shark hit me, he hit a bony area." Perhaps genetics should be credited instead of luck, as Alan carried his 175 pounds on a six-foot-four-inch frame. The shark couldn't have hit anything but bones.

Alan didn't dive again in the Marshalls, and by the time he went back in the water again at home in Hawai'i, he was completely at ease. "I had done a lot of diving and spearfishing over the years, and in the back of my mind I always believed that I was putting myself unto that ecosystem. There was always the possibility that since I was playing that game, I could become not the hunter, but the hunted.

"It was kind of like it was my turn to be tasted, and I was fortunate that I was tasted and not eaten."

Besides, Alan feels that his chances are extremely good in Hawai'i. "I saw sharks everywhere in the Marshalls, and I hardly ever see them in Hawai'i."

Although Alan has made his peace with sharks, he's more alert than he was before the attack. And if he looks for fins in the water between waves while surfing solo at Suicides, it's understandable. That's the only place he has seen a shark on O'ahu during a surf session. ▲

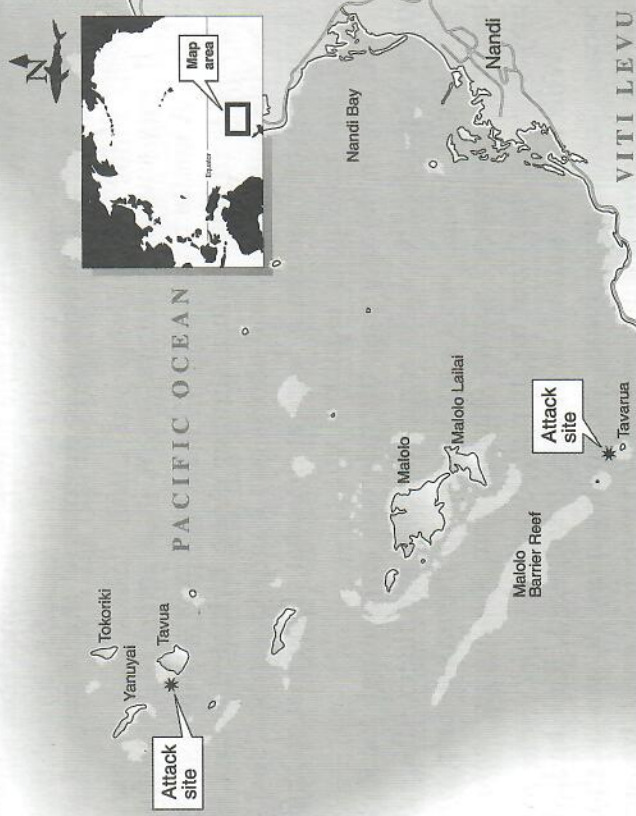
## Heaven Has a Bite

Rick Isbell thought he knew what paradise was. After all, he was born and raised on the Big Island of Hawai'i, the island in that lovely chain that has retained its original innocence better than any of the others.

Rick lived a youngster's fantasy, hiking in tropical forests, swimming in pools filled by cool water that sang as it tumbled over tall ledges and danced hypnotically down to the waiting pools.

He and his friends shared a generous ocean that offered fish for their spears and waves for their surfboards, and life was sweet. And then, in 1985, Rick discovered true paradise on Tavarua, a forty-acre slice of heaven on earth just a forty-minute boat ride off the west coast of Viti Levu in Fiji.

The tiny island is surrounded by waves, perfect, uncrowded waves that offer the supreme exhilaration of long, hollow tube rides. The water is so clear that between waves Rick could gaze in wonder at coral dressed in improbable



shades of purple, blue and red, and darting among the coral are reef fish more exotic than anything he had seen in Hawai'i.

Beyond the surf line, swarming flocks of swooping, diving seabirds betray bountiful schools of *ulua*, *pāpio*, *mahimahi* and tuna.

At night, the stars have no competition from manmade light, so they blaze with the cold radiance of exquisitely faceted diamonds and celebrate their supremacy in the sky by flinging shooting stars.

But the best part is the Fijians. Their size and strength are intimidating, but their every word and gesture reveals a gentle, generous temperament. Rick wanted to remain among these splendid people on their heavenly island forever, and before long he had worked out a deal with the Fijian chiefs and California surfers who controlled Tavarua.

The Californians had turned Tavarua into a surf camp that specializes in making surfers' wildest dreams come true, with perfect waves, delicious isolation, excellent fishing and an aloha that never wanes. Rick fashioned a satisfactory arrangement with the chiefs and the homesick Californians to manage the island, with help from his family and partners.

The Fijians get much-needed jobs, a lease fee for Tavarua and an additional share of the profits for their village on Viti Levu. Visiting surfers get an exceptional surf experience, and Rick gets to remain in heaven.

Before long, however, Rick discovered that a serpent infests his garden of Eden.

It was another beautiful night in a series of beautiful tropical nights. A gentle breeze made the palm fronds murmur in their sleep, while a faint light from a slender moon twinkled across the ocean. The tide was ebbing, and across one hundred yards of reef flat, hundreds of exotic sea shells were at the edge of the reef on their nightly crawl, just waiting to be picked up.

At one in the morning, the tide was low enough for Rick and his sister Mahealani to wade across the reef and begin filling their bags with shells, which were easy to spot in the ankle-deep water. Rick heard an occasional splash coming from the deeper water, and figured it was a shark out for its nightly patrol.

With each beautiful shell they discovered, Rick and Mahealani came increasingly intent on finding more. It was as though they were in the cave of wonders and had to grab as much treasure as pos-

sible before the owner showed up to evict them. They wandered apart, each mesmerized by the hunt, until Rick heard more splashes.

He began to seriously wonder what was causing all the commotion, and decided to investigate. He shined his flashlight in the area the splashes were coming from and was alarmed to see nine sharks in a few feet of water circling the shell hunters.

One or two sharks were a nuisance, but a whole school was more dangerous than a pack of wild dogs. Rick didn't want to alarm Mahealani, who was oblivious to their peril as she happily continued gathering shells in calf-deep water. So he called out softly, "Hey Mahealani, come over here. See that little rock sticking out of the water? I want to check it out."

As the splashing grew louder and his sister reluctantly edged over in his direction, Rick called out a bit more brusquely, "Hey, come a little quicker." She continued to dawdle and the splashes increased in intensity, so Rick finally shouted, "Come over here now!"

Alarmed, she scampered over and they stepped out of the water onto the rock. Rick held her in his arms, then shined his light on the sharks, which had become increasingly bold and were darting up to the rock.

The siblings were safe for the moment and watched in morbid fascination as the pale moonlight glistened wetly off the shadowy sharks circling their haven. After an hour had passed slowly, they were dismayed to notice that the rising tide was beginning to cover their sanctuary. Although they hadn't heard any splashes for about fifteen minutes, they were reluctant to strike out for the distant shore, fearing that the sharks would attack them immediately.

The minutes crawled by and the water inched higher and higher, until it finally covered their rock. They couldn't wait any longer. The first step was the hardest, and they tensed, expecting sharp teeth to tear into their legs. The water was now waist deep, and the five- and six-foot sharks could easily swim right up to them.

It was the most agonizing walk of their lives, as they stared frantically around them while wading through water that minutes before had been swarming with sharks. The beach fairly glowed in the dark, a beacon of safety one hundred yards away that seemed to recede with each step rather than get closer.

They tried to run through the water, but the footing was treacherous, and after stumbling painfully into holes in the jagged, irregular

coral they slowed to a nerveracking walk that they were sure would give the sharks a better chance to catch them.

Finally, they set foot on dry sand and collapsed with relief, as Rick vowed never to hunt shells without a little boat to ferry him safely out to the reef's edge and back.

The misadventure taught Rick that the real serpent in paradise isn't the venomous sea snakes that crawl ashore at night, attracted by the hum of Tavarua's generators, but the bronze whaler sharks. Whenever divers in Fiji spear fish, they can expect to be visited by these sharks, eager to share the prize.

Although not as impressively large as tiger sharks and great whites, bronze whalers are feared throughout the Pacific and Indian oceans for their aggression. Also known as copper sharks because of their metallic hue, bronze whalers are members of the requiem family along with bull, hammerhead, blue, and tiger sharks, all of which have attacked and killed people.

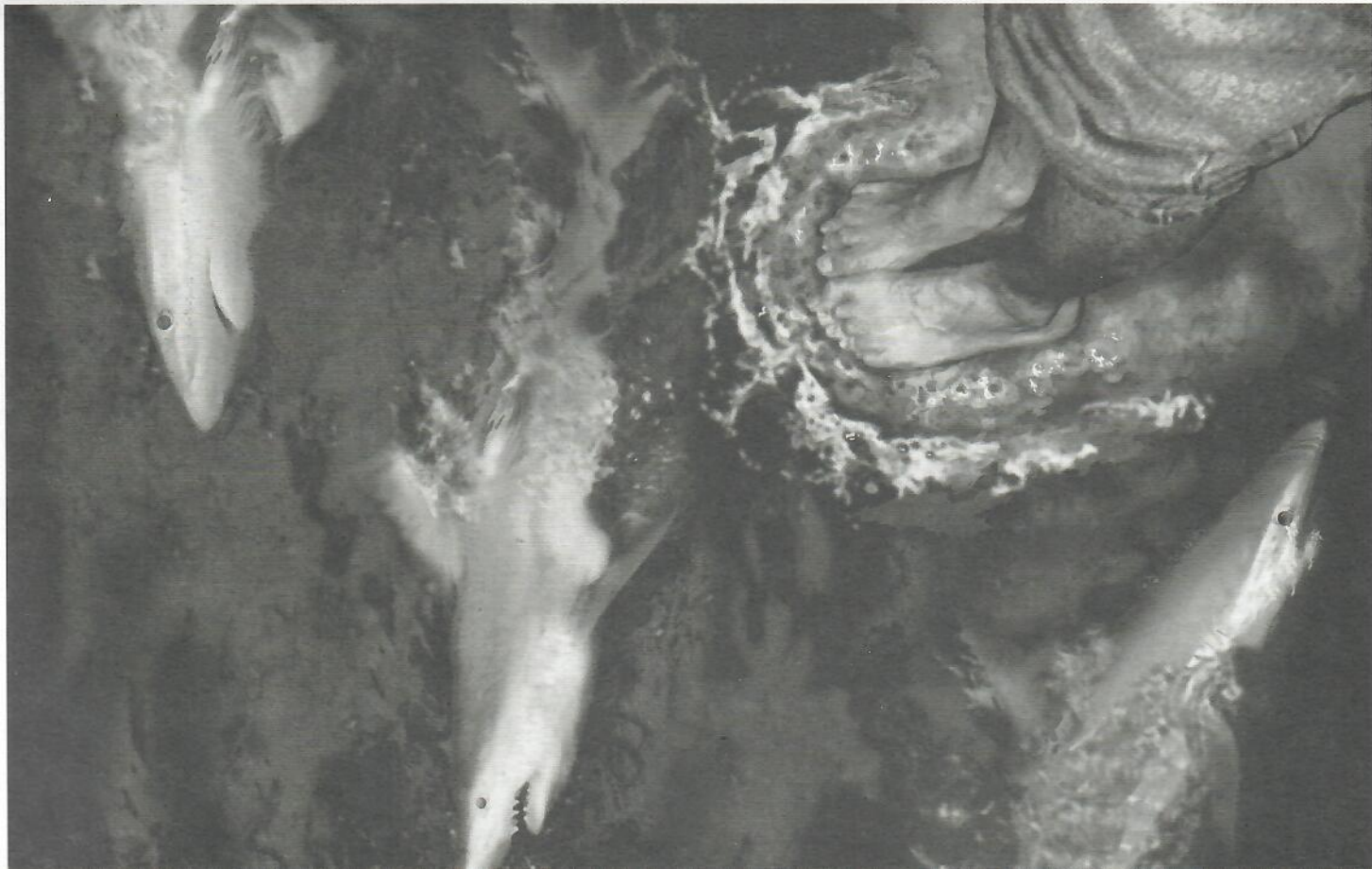
Fiji divers have learned to dread the inevitable arrival of the bronze whalers, *Carcharhinus brachyurus*, which can reach up to nine feet in length and swarm like dogs to seize fish right off their spears. The divers battle the sharks for the fish, knowing full well that if they let them take fish once, they'll keep coming back for more. Their persistence is legendary.

Rick took a group of guests to scuba dive off a pinnacle near Tavarua, and after only a half hour the visitors were finished for the day. Rick had seen a big school of barracuda about seventy feet down the pinnacle, so he headed below by himself to spear a few.

He shot a five-footer, which struggled mightily as he reeled in his line. He grappled to get his arm around the fish to pin it to his body and finish it off, when the barracuda squirmed off the spear and swam away.

Cursing his miserable luck, Rick watched his prey vanish from sight. He turned around and immediately had better reason to curse. There was an eight-foot bronze whaler, its pectoral fins downthrust and its back arching in a warning of attack.

The shark was intimidating as it began biting the reef like a mad dog while swimming erratically, charging toward Rick and darting away. Alarmed by the aggressive display, Rick decided the shark probably thought he was the fish the shark had sensed wriggling on the spear. Rick's heart sank as he realized he had nothing to offer the



shark to keep it from attacking him.

The bronze whaler expected something to eat, and it wouldn't let Rick alone. The powerful, speedy shark charged him repeatedly, forcing Rick to fend it off with his spear tip as he headed for the surface. The boat was seventy-five yards away, and Rick kept turning circles to face the darting shark to prevent it from getting an angle at his back for a deadly attack. The swim to the boat was excruciatingly slow, as Rick kept his eyes locked on his tormentor while it charged him, then popped off in an incredible burst of speed with a flick of its tail only to charge again.

Rick was getting dizzy from turning to face the shark as it darted in at him. The creature was determined to hound him all the way to the boat, where the guest divers and boatmen watched in horror when they realized why Rick was behaving to erratically.

The boat provided no relief from the attacks. The shark was still after him, and Rick couldn't take his eyes off the shark to turn his back and climb aboard. He was certain the shark would seize the opportunity to deliver a serious, possibly fatal, bite. He continued to fend off the shark with his spear while spinning around the boat in his deadly dance with the bronze whaler.

Suddenly, the excited shark broke off from Rick and in its agitation began biting the top of the boat. It was exactly the break Rick was hoping for. He quickly flung his scuba gear into the boat and with a wild strength powered by excitement and fear, hauled himself over the side.

After gnawing the boat a little longer, the shark swam away to seek an easier meal.

As a result of years of similar encounters with sharks in Fiji, Rick has come to regard sharks with the same serenity as do most Pacific Islanders. The ocean is the islanders' playground, their larder, their source of pleasure and sustenance, and sharks aren't terrible monsters, but merely an acceptable occupational risk, the same nuisance that dogs represent to mail carriers.

To some islanders, sharks are much more. They are gods, to be revered and honored with special rituals. Since ancient times the Fijians of Taveuni Island, three hundred miles northeast of Tavarua, have believed their chiefs to be direct descendants of the shark god *Dakuwaqa*, a belief that continues today.

Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau, a president of Fiji, was also a chief of

Taveuni who traced his lineage to *Dakuwaqa*. During his funeral flotilla in Suva Harbor in December, 1993, mourners nodded with approval when a school of sharks surfaced during the ceremonial twenty-one-gun salute and escorted the government vessel *Tovuto* out to sea, where it carried Ganilau's casket home to Taveuni Island.

Women mourners wept at the sight and proclaimed that Ganilau was a truly great chief and that the shark escort reaffirmed his bloodline to the shark god.

The worship of *Dakuwaqa* and reverence for sharks haven't kept Taveuni residents or visitors safe from attack, however, and there have been two fatal encounters since 1992. Despite the attacks, most Fijians consider sharks a nuisance rather than ravenous, human-eating machines.

John Jonenadaba is one of Rick's best workers at the surf camp on Tavarua Island. Visiting surfers listen seriously when John tells them the story of when he was nine years old and a shark attacked his father.

A group of ten Fijians were spearfishing for trevally and grouper from a boat near their island of Tavua, forty miles northwest of Tavarua. As soon as John's father speared a fish, an eight-foot bronze whaler rocketed toward him and clamped its jaws around his back and stomach.

The whaler shook the diver vigorously and began dragging him into deeper water. John's father threw away the fish and spear and grabbed the shark's nose and fins to force the shark to head for the surface.

Desperation to avoid a horrible death gave him superhuman strength as he wrestled the shark upward. The choice of death by drowning or loss of blood was equally grim, so he fought the shark until they broke through the surface and he was able to take a breath of sweet air.

His friends immediately killed the shark with their spears while others loaded the badly bleeding diver into the boat and wrapped their clothes around him to stop the flow of blood.

They sped off to Tavua, where they applied leaves and an herbal poultice to comfort him while they made the hourlong boat ride to the main island of Viti Levu.

They carried him to shore, wading uncomplainingly across the sharp, shallow reef that protects Viti Levu, then made the long car

de to the nearest hospital clinic. The doctor used more than one hundred stitches to sew up the bite, which tore open the skin and muscles all around his torso and left a scar that John's father was fond of showing to scare naughty children.

The attack didn't scare John away from the ocean, nor did it dishearten one of his father's brothers, who made a living entertaining tourists by feeding bronze whalers by hand in deep water.

"All the sharks want is the fish, they don't want the person," says John.

The terrible injury the shark inflicted upon his father didn't fill John with a dread of the creatures, nor did it keep him from spearfishing over the years. He enjoys working at Rick's surf camp on Tavarua Island, and although John doesn't have to fish for a living, he still loves to spearfish.

"The sharks know there is a human in the water, but they just want the fish. The sharks come sniffing around every time I dive when I spear a fish."

Usually he ignores them, but they can be tenacious. He was spearfishing right off Tavarua when he hit a good-sized trevally. On cue, an inquisitive bronze whaler appeared and tried to grab the fish right off John's spear.

Angry rather than afraid, John lifted the fish and spear out of the water. Deprived of its easy meal, the shark bit through John's wet suit, a gift from one of the island's surfer visitors, and into his torso. The shark then began chewing on the rubbery wet suit.

John was determined to keep this aggressive creature from getting his fish. The shark's teeth were doing more damage to his prized wet suit than his body, so John whacked the shark with his free hand until it let go of his wet suit. John then began swimming toward shore calmly but firmly. He wasn't moving very quickly, as he had to stroke with one arm while the other hand held his fish out of the water to protect the fish from the shark.

He wasn't far from the beach, but swimming one-handed was tedious. Whenever he dipped the hand with the fish back into the water to help out with swimming, the shark attacked again. The nasty creature followed him all the way to shore, but John won the battle of wills when he stepped onto the beach still holding his fish, while the shark swam away, still hungry.

"Every time when I see the shark, I kind of stay cool, so I know

what I'm doing," John says. "Sometimes when I shoot the fish, the shark comes around and I share the fish. I give it to him, and it makes him happy."

"But sometimes when you hand the shark the fish, it learns it can get fish from people."

That night John grilled the fish and shared it with others on Tavarua for dinner, savoring the meal that tasted especially delicious because he had fought so hard to keep it. ▲

*“The pressure on his back and legs was intense. It didn’t feel as if he was being held by an animal, more as if he was being crushed between two cars. To his horror, he could feel the shark moving side to side in a swimming motion that carried the creature straight out of the water with Rob clamped sideways in its jaws, pushing him back and forth as it wriggled.”*

Diver Rob Revstock survived this terrifying encounter with a shark, as did the fifteen others whose close encounters with the ocean’s most feared predator are told in *Shark Bites: True Tales of Survival*. Anyone who ever goes into the ocean will identify with the horror these men and women felt as they battled sharks in the waters of Hawai’i, the Marshall Islands, Fiji, Tahiti, and California.

But this is more than a book about shark attacks. As terrifying as these stories are, they are also educational—and inspirational. If you’ve ever asked yourself, “Why do sharks attack people? What would I do if a shark attacked me? If I even saw a shark up close, could I ever go in the water again?” this book provides some answers in the examples of the courageous men and women whose stories are told by surfer, journalist, and author Greg Ambrose.

Greg Ambrose surfs daily in the waters of Hawai’i. As the ocean reporter for the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, author of *Surfer’s Guide to Hawaii*, and co-author of *Memories of Duke: The Legend Comes to Life*, he has shared his love of the sea with thousands of readers.



*Author Greg Ambrose, far right, rubs a tiger shark’s belly to put it in a trancelike state. University of Hawai’i researchers will slice open its abdominal wall to insert a transmitter into the shark’s body cavity, then sew the incision closed. Recaptured sharks have shown that the wounds have healed without complication. Photo by Carl Meyer.*

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