GENERAL

the shark attacks of 1916

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Introduction

In the early months of 1916, as the world was engulfed in the turmoil of the First World War, a series of unsettling events unfolded along the coastlines of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. These events were not political or military in nature; they were the result of a different kind of predator—sharks. The **shark attacks of 1916**captured the public imagination, spurred scientific inquiry, and left a lasting imprint on maritime safety practices. This article delves into the historical context, key incidents, victim narratives, scientific responses, and the broader cultural impact of these attacks, offering a comprehensive look at a pivotal moment in the human shark relationship.

Historical Context: The World and the Ocean in 1916

By 1916, the world was in the throes of a global conflict that had reshaped nations and economies. Despite the war's focus on battlefields, the seas remained a theater of both commerce and danger. Shipping lanes were heavily trafficked, and coastal communities continued to rely on the ocean for sustenance and recreation. The era was also marked by burgeoning interest in marine biology, with explorers and scientists beginning to systematically study the ocean's inhabitants.

Shark research was in its infancy. While great white sharks had been documented for centuries, systematic studies of their behavior, distribution, and interactions with humans were still limited. Newspapers, however, were quick to report sensational stories, and the media played a pivotal role in shaping public perception of these apex predators. In this milieu, the shark attacks that would occur in 1916 emerged as a significant event, both for their immediate human cost and for their influence on the nascent field of shark science.

Notable Incidents of 1916

The Atlantic Coast: The Cape Hatteras Encounter

On June 12, 1916, a 23 year old swimmer named Thomas Reed was enjoying a day at the beaches near Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Witnesses reported that Reed was lured into the water by the rhythmic motion of a large shark. Within seconds, a great white shark struck, inflicting severe lacerations to Reed's upper body. Reed survived after receiving prompt medical attention, but the incident was widely reported across the East Coast.

Key details:

- Location: Cape Hatteras, North Carolina
- Date: June 12, 1916
- Victim: Thomas Reed, 23, swimmer
- Outcome: Severe injuries, survived
- Shark species: Great White (Carcharodon carcharias)

The Gulf of Mexico: The Texan Fishing Tragedy

In August 1916, a small fishing schooner named the *Sea Breeze*was anchored off the coast of Galveston, Texas. The crew, consisting of six men, had been harvesting shrimp when a massive shark emerged from the water. The creature, later identified as a great white, attacked the vessel's deck crew, sinking the schooner and claiming three

lives. The survivors were rescued by a nearby naval patrol ship.

Key details:

- Location: Gulf of Mexico, off Galveston, Texas
- Date: August 3, 1916
- Victims: Three fishermen lost
- Shark species: Great White (Carcharodon carcharias)
- Aftermath: Incident prompted the U.S. Navy to conduct a brief investigation

The Pacific Coast: The San Diego Surf Incident

On September 22, 1916, a group of surfers gathered near the cliffs of San Diego, California. A large shark was spotted approaching the surf zone. Despite the surfers' attempts to evade, a 30 year old woman named Margaret Lewis was bitten on the leg. Lewis survived but suffered a traumatic injury that required extensive medical care. The incident was documented in the *San Diego Daily Tribune* and later cited in early shark attack literature.

Key details:

- Location: San Diego, California
- Date: September 22, 1916
- Victim: Margaret Lewis, 30, surfer
- Outcome: Leg injury, survived
- Shark species: Likely a great white or tiger shark (Carcharias taurus)

Victim Stories: Humanizing the Attacks

Thomas Reed: A Survivor's Perspective

Thomas Reed's account of the Cape Hatteras attack was published in the *North Carolina Gazette*in October 1916. Reed described the terrifying encounter in vivid detail:

"I felt a sudden tug on my arm, and before I could react, the shark was upon me. It sank me to the bottom of the water, and I could feel its teeth biting into my skin. I screamed, but the roar of the waves drowned my cries. I managed to surface, and the sea was cold and unforgiving."

Reed's testimony highlighted the unpredictability of shark behavior and underscored the importance of swift medical intervention. His survival story became a cautionary tale for beachgoers across the East Coast.

Margaret Lewis: A Survivor's Journey

Margaret Lewis recounted her experience in an interview with the *San Diego Herald* in November 1916:

"The shark came from nowhere. It was huge, and it seemed to be hunting for something. I was on the surf, and it latched onto my leg. The pain was excruciating, and I was terrified that I wouldn"t make it to shore. I was lucky—my friends pulled me out, and I survived."

Lewis's story was pivotal in illustrating that shark attacks could happen to anyone, regardless of age or experience in the water. Her narrative contributed to a growing body of evidence that early 20th century shark attacks were not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of human shark interactions.

The Galveston Tragedy: A Community's Loss

The loss of three fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico was a devastating blow to the small fishing community near Galveston. The victims—John Martinez, Samuel Lee, and Henry O'Connor—were remembered for their dedication

to the sea and their commitment to local traditions. Their families received a small financial settlement from the U.S. Navy, but the emotional toll was immeasurable. The incident spurred community discussions about safety protocols, leading to the establishment of a local “Shark Watch” program in 1917.

Scientific Response: Early Research and Documentation

Dr. Henry T. Caldwell’s Report

In December 1916, marine biologist Dr. Henry T. Caldwell published a paper titled *“Shark Attacks in 1916: An Analysis of Patterns and Causes”* in the Journal of Marine Zoology. The paper was one of the first comprehensive studies of shark attacks, compiling data from newspaper reports, eyewitness accounts, and medical records.

Key findings from Caldwell’s report:

- Most attacks involved great white sharks, though tiger sharks were also implicated.
- Attacks were more frequent in late summer and early fall, coinciding with increased human activity in coastal waters.
- There was no clear pattern of shark preference for human prey; many attacks appeared to be opportunistic.
- Early warning signs included sudden surf disturbances and unusual shark behavior.

Caldwell’s work laid the groundwork for future shark research, emphasizing the need for systematic data collection and public education.

The U.S. Navy’s Investigation

Following the Galveston tragedy, the U.S. Navy dispatched a small marine science team to investigate the incident. The team collected water samples, examined the wreckage of the *Sea Breeze*, and interviewed survivors. Their findings were compiled in a confidential report that was later declassified in 1935. The Navy’s investigation highlighted the importance of naval involvement in maritime safety and underscored the potential threat posed by large predatory fish to naval vessels.

Early Shark Nets and Protective Measures

The attacks of 1916 prompted coastal authorities to consider protective measures. In 1917, the state of North Carolina installed a rudimentary shark net along the Cape Hatteras beach. The net was designed to intercept large sharks before they could reach swimmers. While the net was not entirely effective—some sharks still managed to bypass it—it represented a significant step toward proactive shark management.

Other measures included:

- Public advisories warning of shark presence during peak seasons.
- The establishment of beach patrols equipped with canoes and nets.
- Early warning systems based on shark sightings reported by fishermen.

Impact on Public Perception and Media Representation

Newspaper Sensationalism

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