

Bandit's Story: The Real-life Rescue of a Great White Shark

By Melanie Paul

I joined the team of Great White Adventures (GWA) on a Great White Shark expedition to Guadalupe Island, Mexico this September. Guadalupe is an archipelago in the Eastern Pacific, approximately 200 miles south of San Diego, California and 145 miles offshore from Baja, California. The island is impressive with high jagged cliffs and a desolate foreboding appearance.

We were a mixed group of adventurers on this trip; PEW Research Institute, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute, Guy Harvey Research Institute, Guy Harvey himself and a host of other experienced divers. We endured a crossing of more than 24 hours for one reason – to see the most feared and fascinating predator on earth besides man, the Great White Shark. I have been diving for over 15 years and have traveled to dive destinations all over the world, but I knew that I was about to experience something that none of my previous diving trips had prepared me for.

The luxury live- aboard Solmar V was my home for the next week. She is a beauty and one of the most luxurious live-aboard dive vessels in the world. The Solmar V features private cabins with private bathrooms in each cabin. The salon and dining areas are lavish and trimmed in hardwoods and polished brass. It feels more like a cruise than

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a live-aboard ship. The outside diving station is spacious, with ample space for gear, cameras and video equipment. (And, you won't fight over workspace and outlets at the camera table!) There is plenty of room for battery chargers and housings. The Solmar V usually accommodates up

to 22 divers on weeklong expeditions to the Socorro Islands, but GWA limits passengers to 16 on White Shark expeditions.

GWA is owned and operated by Captain Lawrence Groth (and no, he doesn't go by Larry). Before I met Lawrence, I had read about him and GWA in several magazines and online. Lawrence discovered Guadalupe as a shark diving destination in 2001 and pioneered the first cage diving expedition there that same year. He has been running expeditions there ever since. Groth racked up over 60 Guadalupe expeditions under his belt with a 100% shark encounter record during the past five years.

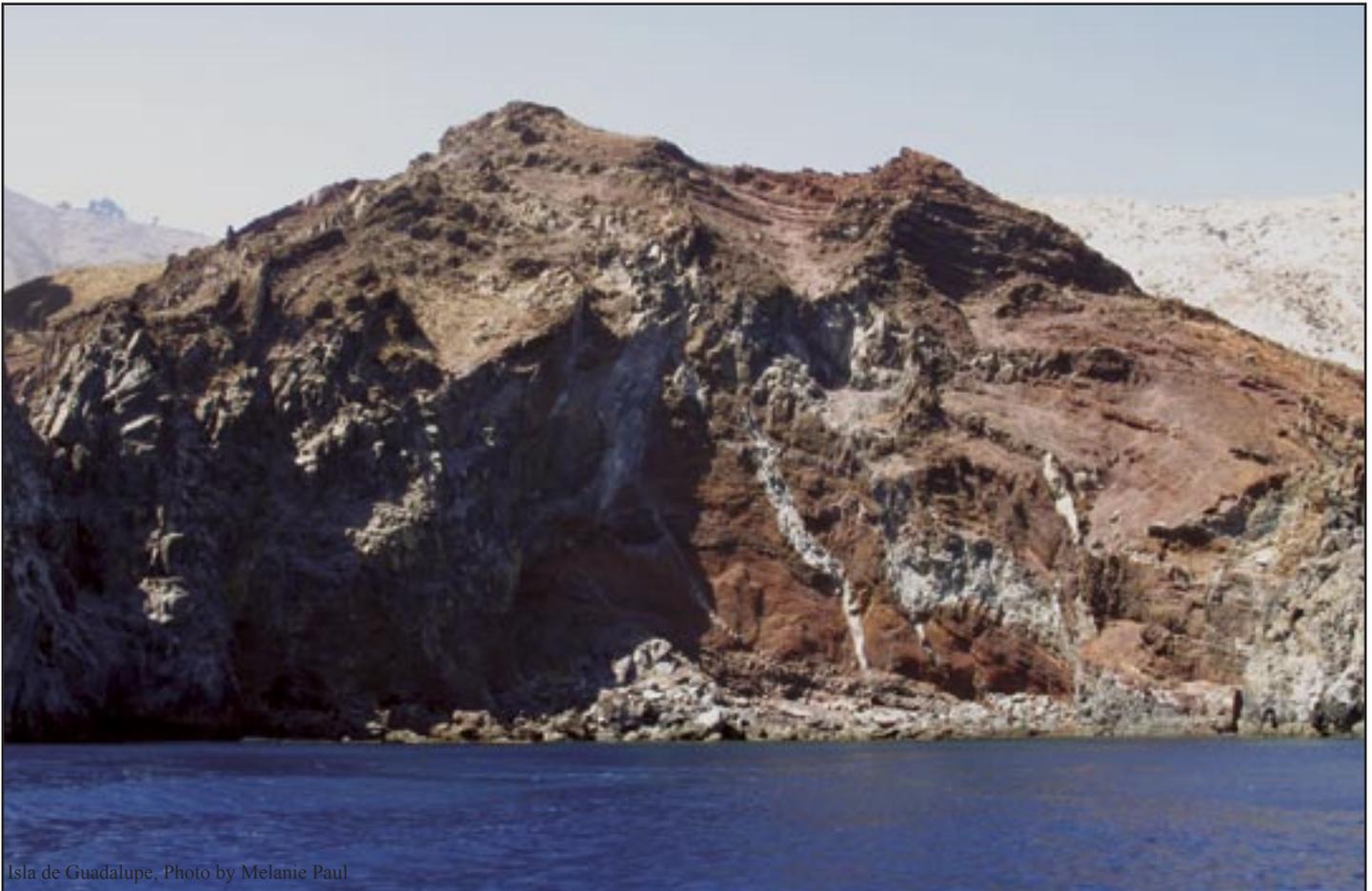
No other operator anywhere can make that claim. "It isn't that difficult," says Groth. "You must do your homework, study the sharks' patterns and behaviors. You go when the sharks are there and be nice to them. Love them, and they will love you back."

He and the company were profiled in *Under Current* and *Shark Diver*, to name a few. *Under Current* is a public forum, which built its reputation on unbiased reviews from actual divers. GWA is the only cage diving outfitter to receive rave reviews from divers who experienced these expeditions first-hand. They are also known as the best operator, with the most successful shark encounter reputation, and hold the most outstanding safety record in the business. No divers or sharks have been injured during a GWA expedition – ever.

My adventure with GWA was the single best investment I've made on a dive vacation. Sharks circled the boat and cages every day. This was not the place to take quick dip. Anyone caught swimming in the open here is taking their life in their hands. I felt a little bit like the lobster in the display tank at my local seafood market when I first entered the cage, just waiting for my number to come up as next in line on the food chain. I held my breath and squeezed my buddy's hand so hard that I feared I might break it. Within moments I relaxed. I felt completely safe inside the cage and started to move around to find the best positions for pictures and observing the sharks. There wasn't a bad seat in the house. The hours passed quickly in the massive shark cages. Some shark divers spent more time in the cages than others, and I say that with a smile. There were times when the crew had to literally drag me from the cage each time my rotation was up. I had waited for this experience since childhood and I could not get enough. Adrenaline is a highly addictive substance for me, apparently.

The sturdy four-diver cages were superb platforms for photography and video, and the submersible cage was even more intense. The cage has no top! Lawrence took each of us down, one at a time, to 30 fsw below the surface. We sat together on the top of cage for about 30 minutes, watching the sharks from all angles. There is nothing down there except the most gorgeous blue water you've ever seen and sharks swimming all around you. They really are beautiful. You must see them fly above you to truly appreciate their grace.

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Isla de Guadalupe, Photo by Melanie Paul

them. However, touching or petting any of the sharks at any time is strictly forbidden. Our desire to connect with nature is not necessarily reciprocated. The GWA philosophy is strict on human-animal interaction; always show the sharks the utmost respect and never think they are any different than any other wild animal.

My last day of diving at Guadalupe started with another beautiful sunrise and calm seas. We had over 150 fsw visibility. The stern area was buzzing with activity. Divers scurried about setting up cameras and video systems. The camera table is the hub of outside activity. Otherwise, everyone is cage diving or watching the shark action topside. The Shark Wranglers worked the hang baits and kept five sharks occupied around the cages. I came out of the cage for a little lunch break. I peeled out of my wet suit hung and it up at my personal gear area on the port side. I set my camera down in the rinse tank and went into the galley to see Pedro, our chef. He was busy whipping up another gourmet surprise and said that I should head up to the bow for a little sunbathing. He would send Pepe, the steward, forward to serve me at my favorite spot. The thought of enjoying the sun while I had lunch was too tempting to pass up, so I grabbed my beach towel and headed off. Pepe arrived a few minutes later with a bowl of hot tortilla soup, followed by fresh Hamachi sashimi

with homemade guacamole and a seasonal fruit. Shark diving makes you hungry, but this crew knows how to keep the customers full and happy at all times.

I was happy to see that Groth was sitting up on the bow enjoying some of Pedro's hot tortilla soup too. He had been diving with clients in the submersible cage all day, and this was his first break in about five hours. He smiled with his big grin under his trademark moustache and asked how my day was going. "Just incredible." I said. "It amazes me that each day just keeps getting better than the day before. I am having the best trip of my diving career and that I wish we had another week out here. I hate to leave this place."

Groth chuckled, satisfied, as if he'd heard those words a thousand times before. "Yes, we had been blessed once again by the shark gods. They must be very pleased with us." He told me he was excited because two individual sharks, Patches and Bitehead, were identified again on this trip. They had been seen at Guadalupe for the past five seasons but had not been seen that season until that day. Groth explained, "It is like having old friends that you worry about until you see them again, and then you feel so relieved to know that they are OK and healthy."

We both sat there together quietly staring out over the water for a few minutes. Groth pointed

just below the bow. A white shark slowly approached us from the depths. It came almost to the surface before and leveled off directly underneath us. We both turned and walked to the other side of the bow, following it. It swam down the side of the boat toward the stern. Groth yelled, "That shark is in trouble!"

"What? What's going on?" I asked.

He pointed at the shark's head and said that there was something wrapped around it, just forward of the dorsal fin. I ran ahead of him and looked closer as the shark swam aft along the boat. I was able to get a clear look at it. Groth was right. Something white ran around the shark's back in between the snout and the dorsal fin, dangerously close to the gills.

"What is that? It looks like a giant rubber band," I said, concerned.

Groth replied urgently. "We have to get in that cage and take a closer look. That shark is definitely in trouble."

We headed back to the swim platform together. Groth quickly donned his wetsuit, grabbed one of the 50-pound weight belts, slung it around his shoulders and walked right into the port cage. The shark passed right in front of the cage as he went in. The timing was perfect. I lost sight of the shark from the sun's glare as it crossed over to the other side of the boat. The bright light made it impossible for me to see anything else from the surface. I ran to the other side, but I still could not see where it went.

I went back as Groth came out of the water. He said something in Spanish to Nelson, one of the dive masters. Nelson got in with Groth and they both submerged. When they finally surfaced, they stood on the swim platform and talked quietly for a few minutes. I had to know what was happening. I asked Groth if he saw what was wrapped around the shark. He said that it appeared to be a plastic hoop or strap. He explained that whatever it was, looked like it had been there for some time and had started to cause big problems for the little guy. We determined the shark was a young male, about five years old and approximately eight to nine feet long. The shark had grown since the strap found its way around it and dug into the flesh on its head and gills.

The shark had a hangman's noose around its neck. As the shark grew, the band did not. Sooner or later the young shark would strangle to death. I imagined a slow and agonizing death for this young shark. My hands shook on the rail. I was horrified!

I turned and yelled at Groth. "Who did this? How did this happen?!" I was furious. Great Whites are major trophies for sportsmen. Although they were protected at Guadalupe, poachers hunted them anyway. Groth walked over to me.

"It's sad, but not uncommon for marine life all over the world," he said. "There are many cases when marine wildlife die from entanglement in trash and other waste left in the ocean by humans." He continued, "I think a cardboard box with a plastic sealing strap was tossed overboard by an uncaring sailor. The cardboard deteriorated and the strap floated free. It drifted across the ocean until this poor shark simply swam through it and trapped it against its dorsal and pectoral fins. With the constant forward motion of the shark, the water flow has held that strap in place while the shark continued to grow."

"So, the shark is doomed by its own growth rate," I said. "The faster it grows. The faster it dies." I felt sick to my stomach. I admired and respected these animals and one of them was going to die because some person didn't care enough to properly take out the trash. The chances seemed astronomical that it had even

happened, but here was this shark with a plastic box strap trapped around its neck slowly dying. I thought about how many times I've watched people casually toss cigarette butts and beer cans overboard at home in Florida. It disgusted me. The human condition was selfish. We, as a species, generally didn't think about the butterfly-effect we created each time we mistreated mother earth. Even the smallest offenses left a scar. Groth spoke and brought me out of my daze. The shark was headed back and he wanted me to jump in the cage to survey the situation for myself.

I ran and grabbed my wetsuit off the drying rack and tried to get dressed as I made my way back to the dive station and cages. I could not shake the horrible image of that poor shark. Then, I lost a battle with gravity and ended up right on my tush. Have you ever tried to run on a slippery deck and put on a wetsuit at the same time? It's not a good idea. Groth leaned over right away and helped me up. We both laughed and he teased, "Take it easy, Grace. I can only do one rescue at a time."

I said, "Oh, you're funny... looking." I hopped on to the swim step. "Wait, what do you mean 'rescue'?"

"If we do nothing," Groth replied, "that shark is

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dead within a month. Can you deal with that?"

"No. His situation is terrible," I said. "But, how on earth do you plan to rescue a Great White Shark?"

"Simple," Groth said as he started to close the top of the cage above my head. "I will swim out after the shark and cut the strap off."

The top of cage barely shut as I replayed his last statement in my head. I shot up from the water and flung the top open with my hand. "You're going to do what?!" I yelled. "Are you crazy? That is a Great White Shark, not a Nurse or Reef or Lemon Shark. You know what these animals are capable of, and this one is injured so I doubt he's in the best of moods!" I leaned forward to Groth so the others couldn't hear. "There are several large sharks in the water with us right now. This could be a mistake. I don't know if you should do it."

Groth looked at me with a serious expression I had never seen on his face before. "We don't have a choice. This is the right thing to do and we're doing it. You stay in the cage and watch my back. I'll wait for the right moment and just do it!"

Groth split to get his scuba rig and fins. I walked over to Nelson and asked if he was really serious about free-swimming with an injured Great White. Nelson said yes, but not to worry because Groth would not take any unnecessary risks. I didn't take much comfort in his words. "He's done this sort of thing before," Nelson said.

"What do you mean, 'he's done this sort of thing before'?" I half choked on the statement. Nelson told me about a time when they saw a shark with a satellite tag on its back. The tag was damaged and couldn't have transmitted the valuable data it

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contained. Satellite tags recorded vital information about the shark such as the depth it swam to, water temperature and the path it traveled throughout its yearlong migration. Groth had waited hours for the shark to swim close enough to reach out and grab the tag. He retrieved it and returned it to the research lab that deployed the tag the year before. They were extremely grateful for it. The tag cost over \$3,000.00 and the

data it collected was priceless. I thought about what Nelson said. True, Groth had more time observing the sharks at Guadalupe than just about anyone, but this time he wanted to leave the cage, not just reach out from it. I was nervous.

Groth returned to the swim platform with a scuba tank and regulator mounted on a Dive Rite harness and wings. He donned the scuba rig, put his fins on and asked me to hand him his Dive Rite Z-knife. The Z-knife was a line cutting tool, about four inches long and made of plastic. It had a handle that was shaped like a hook with a razor blade imbedded in the center of the hook. It was a very useful tool if a diver was tangled in line. I put the knife in his hands and watch him slip into the water between the cages. I jumped into the port cage and started to watch out for sharks.

Approximately four feet separated the two surface cages. This gave Groth some protection to his sides but nothing from the back, front or below. I could see three other sharks at that moment, and I was sure others circled just beyond my sight. My hands squeezed tightly around the bars of the cage. Please, I thought, let this go smoothly and quickly. My heart pounded in my chest. It felt like it was going to explode. I was sure the sharks could feel it too. The other divers realized what was going on and started to gather around topside. Groth had not made any kind of announcement to anyone else. He only asked permission from the Captain and discussed his intentions with the other dive masters. Pretty soon the word went out. Everyone watched from topside or inside the other cage.

It did not take long before he Groth had his first opportunity. The shark came in from the stern and swam 15 feet in front of him. Once the shark turned away, Groth was after him. He made it within inches of the shark's right side, but just as he got ready to lunge for the strap the shark realized he was there and bolted away quickly. The shark's tail accidentally smacked him right in the chest and abdomen and nearly knocked the wind out of him. Groth slowly swam back to the swim platform and exited the water. Everyone started calling the shark Bandit. A few other big sharks showed up. Bandit split and Groth decided it was best to stand down until Bandit decided to come back.

Meanwhile, everyone had his or her own idea about removing the strap. Guy Harvey suggested that Groth use a large knife and slash the strap off. If the shark got cut, it would certainly heal and the shark would survive. Groth thought it was worth a try and went back into the water with a 12" butcher knife.

It wasn't long when Bandit came back. He

swam close to the cages again and the other sharks were far away so Groth went out after him again with this huge knife shining in the sunlight. Well, Bandit had no part of that knife and circled away from him but stayed within sight. Groth hit the surface laughing. "Nothing, not even a white shark, is going to let me get close with this huge thing in my hand!" He yelled to the topside audience. Everyone chuckled and started thinking of an alternate approach.

Groth got back on deck and asked Nelson to find a deck scrub-brush handle. Nelson returned moments later with a wooden handle about four feet long and a scrub brush head attached to it. He removed the brush and secured the Dive Rite Z-knife to the end of the handle with plastic zip ties. This gave him the extra reach he needed to cut the strap without spooking the shark or having to get too close. We all hoped that it would work. Every time Groth reentered the water, the odds of things going smoothly diminished. The other sharks started to show curiosity towards Groth, and Bandit refused to get close when bigger animals were around. We had to make this work, fast.

Groth slipped back into the water between the cages. We all watched for a long time and waited on Bandit's return. Other sharks hung around and showed a lot of interest in the hang baits. It was a great show, but no sign of Bandit. About an hour passed when Groth popped up and said, "Here he comes, from the bow!" Groth submerged again. I couldn't see Bandit. I was looked in all different directions when I saw Groth kick down into the blue, away from the cages and the boat. He disappeared deep below and left my line of sight. I held my breath and stared into the water. Someone topside yelled that another shark was coming in from the stern, and I could see a large adult white shark coming in from the port side too. Nelson and Rey stood on the platform. I popped up and met their gaze. We were worried. The minutes ticked by like hours. Where was Groth!? Where was Bandit?!

It seemed like an eternity when all of a sudden one of the divers in the other cage burst to the surface and yelled, "HE DID IT! HE DID IT! Lawrence cut the strap off! He saved Bandit!" Instantly everyone cheered and clapped. All of the divers climbed out of the cages with big smiles. People high-fived each other. It was a celebration.

Groth was nowhere. "Where's Lawrence?" I yelled over the all the cheering. No one answered. I started to feel knots in my stomach. I went back to the cages. The last diver in the water climbed out of the port cage. "Have you seen Lawrence?" I asked nervously. He looked up and smiled from ear to ear. It was Groth! He climbed into the

cage underwater from the lower opening after he cut the strap free from Bandit. I hugged him and then quickly gave him a smack on the arm. "Don't make me worry like that!"

Everyone was ecstatic.

We witnessed Groth's personal dedication to these animals as we watched him risk his own life to save Bandit. Not many people would have even attempted what Groth succeeded in doing. I was





For more information on Great White Shark cage-diving expeditions to Isla de Guadalupe and other shark diving destinations, please visit:

www.greatwhiteadventures.com

www.seesharks.com

glad everyone was safe and most of all, that Bandit would live a long and happy life with a new name.

The sunset that evening was more beautiful than ever and the Solmar V set a course back to reality. It was one of the most exciting days of my life. The whole trip was unforgettable and left a lifelong impression on me. I felt a little sad to leave. I had been part of something special as a member of this incredible expedition to Guadalupe Island. I had to get back there someday soon. This was not a once in a lifetime trip. I planned on making it an annual event!

Everyone returned with incredible images and fantastic memories to share with our families and friends (many of whom thought we were all crazy, until we got home with all of our parts and pieces in tact). To this day, I look at my favorite photos regularly and tell people the story of this incredible adventure. I often think about the shark formally known as Bandit too. I wonder where he went to and what he's been up to? I hope he has stayed out of trouble, but if he ever does get into a jam he has a guardian angel in Guadalupe who goes by Groth. Lawrence Groth and everyone at Great White Adventures work hard every day – doing whatever it takes – to ensure that these amazing animals are safe and protected from harm so that we may continue to observe them for many generations to come.

