



Season 3
Episode 2 Transcript

Face-to-Face With a Great White Shark

Torah Kachur:

If you are a surfer, the ocean can feel like your playground. There's nothing like sitting on a board, feet dangling in the water, looking out to the horizon, waiting for your next wave, and when you get up, for a moment, you're actually part of the ocean, riding its power. And while surfers may feel like they're conquering the waves, ultimately, they're not in control. The ocean is. Phil Mummert learned that the hard way. July is winter in Australia, and Phil, celebrating his birthday with a surf at Bunker Bay, a beach a few hours south of Perth on the west coast. It's a place he'd surfed many times before.

Phil Mummert:

It was mid-winter, there was a bit of sun around. Wasn't too chilly. Yeah, it was nice.

Torah Kachur:

Sitting on his board waiting to catch the next wave, Phil has no idea he's got company. Out of nowhere, a great white shark knocks him off his board.

Phil Mummert:

I really had no idea until it had already got me, and I just had so much adrenaline and so much shock that I couldn't feel it. But my board had been bitten in half.

Torah Kachur:

The shark has also bitten his leg. Phil's now in the water with the shark, and all he has to defend himself is a broken piece of surfboard.

Phil Mummert:

All I was thinking was, "If this bit of foam is in the shark's mouth, then that means that I'm not in its mouth."

Torah Kachur:

The shark begins to circle.

Phil Mummert:

I just remember the size of the dorsal fin coming past me. It felt like it was towering above me, because I was just a head in the water at this point.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur, and this is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. Every day, when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day. Bunker Bay is a popular postcard-worthy beach in the Margaret River region. White sand, crystal-clear turquoise water. It's just a 15-minute drive from Phil's home, and when the winter winds pick up, it's a great spot for surfers.

Phil Mummert:

I started surfing, I don't know what age, back when I was pretty young, and then, yeah, just kind of taught myself how to surf. And been doing it ever since.

Torah Kachur:

And today, July 31st, 2020, Phil and his girlfriend, Mish Wright, are heading to Bunker Bay to celebrate Phil's 28th birthday.

Phil Mummert:

So for my birthday, I'd gotten some spotlights to put on the front of my car, and that morning, I was like, "Oh, should I do the spotlights? Should I go out for a surf?" I've been away at work for a week, so I was pretty keen to get down to the beach, get in the water.

Torah Kachur:

Phil's a geologist. He had just spent eight days working on a site in the desert and was looking forward to six days at home.

Phil Mummert:

Whatever. I can do the spotlights anytime. Let's get down to the beach.

Torah Kachur:

That one decision will make this a surf Phil will never forget. When they arrive, Mish takes the dog for a walk. Phil waxes his board and heads straight into the ocean. There are only about nine other surfers in the water. That's unusual. It's often busier. The waves are perfect, three- to four-foot swells.

Phil Mummert:

That's kind of the size that I'm after. I'm not crazy into big wave surfing, so I'd probably been out for maybe 45 minutes or so. I'd got a few waves.

Torah Kachur:

Phil's taking a break just sitting on his board, taking it all in, about 150 feet offshore.

Phil Mummert:

I was kind of turning around to look at the beach, to see if I could see Mish and

the dog walking on the beach. And yeah, that's when it all happened. I really had no idea until it had got me.

Torah Kachur:

When Phil surfaces, his surfboard is in two pieces.

Phil Mummert:

And I was floating in the water up to my neck, and there was just this big gray thing sitting right in front of me. Its face was about a foot from my face, and it was just pointed directly at me. Took a little bit for me to kind of realize, "Oh, this is a shark." It had bitten my leg, but at this stage, I didn't actually know that I'd been bitten. And I just had so much adrenaline and so much shock that I couldn't feel it.

Torah Kachur:

Within seconds, Phil realizes it's not just any shark, it's the shark the movies have taught us to fear the most.

Phil Mummert:

So it turned out to be a five-meter great white, which is, what's that? 16 feet. It was massive. It was huge.

Torah Kachur:

But Phil doesn't have time to dwell on any of that. His leg is bleeding, and the shark is right there in front of him.

Phil Mummert:

The back half of the board was still attached to my leg with the leg rope, and I just grabbed it and just started shoving it straight into the shark's mouth. All I was thinking was, "If this bit of foam is in the shark's mouth, then that means that I'm not in its mouth." Trying to do everything that I could to try and keep that piece of board in its mouth.

Torah Kachur:

The strategy works. The shark backs off, for a moment, and then, it starts circling.

Phil Mummert:

I really remember, as it came past me on its first circle, touching it, trying to push it. It's just so solid. It felt like I was pushing a brick wall. "Yeah, this isn't going to work. I need to figure something else out here."

Torah Kachur:

Phil turns in the water, trying to keep the shark in front of him. It circles and charges.

Phil Mummert:

But then, it would pull out at the last second and just kind of go past, and it did that twice. And each time, I just remember thinking, “I just need to try and have this piece of board again in between me and the shark.” And that was really all I had.

Torah Kachur:

Not many of us can say we’ve tried to fight off a great white shark with our bare hands. Phil can. But the shark is relentless. How long can Phil last?

Phil Mummert:

I was trying to push it away. I was trying to kick it. Really just trying to do anything to keep it away from me.

Torah Kachur:

This is *Tell Me What Happened*. A podcast created by OnStar, to showcase the importance of a human connection when you need help, whether you are trapped in quicksand, lost in the woods, or bobbing in the ocean, fending off a great white shark. Phil Mummert’s birthday surf was supposed to be a chill few hours at the beach. Now, he’s fighting for his life as a 16-foot great white shark circles and charges at him. Liam Ryan and his buddy, Jess Woolhouse, arrived at Bunker Bay a little later than Phil, excited for a gorgeous day of surfing. They had no idea what lay ahead.

Liam Ryan:

You look out, and you just map out where you want to surf and who’s getting the waves. And I remember there was one surfer sitting there, and he was getting a few little waves to himself. And I said to Jess, “Mate, let’s go sit close to that bloke, because no one’s bothering him.” And that was Phil.

Torah Kachur:

Liam is a longtime surfer, but the thrill of riding the waves isn’t the only thing Liam’s devoted to.

Liam Ryan:

I’m a Catholic priest. I’ve served at all parts of the world, but am currently serving in the northwest of Australia. That particular day, I was surfing on a board that had been custom made for me by Jess, my mate. And he made it for me when I turned 21, which was the year that I entered the seminary, and he called it “The Hail Mary.” So it has my name and an inscription on the bottom, The Hail Mary.

Torah Kachur:

● Liam and Jess catch a couple of waves. Everything’s great. It’s the perfect day.

Liam Ryan:

The sun was warm on your face. The water was nice and cool. We had the whole day to spend enjoying it, and it was one of those moments where you're really just taking it all in.

Torah Kachur:

Liam and Jess are paddling back out, heading towards Phil, sitting on his surfboard.

Liam Ryan:

And the next thing, he wasn't there, and I thought, "Hang on a sec, what's going on?"

Torah Kachur:

Liam doesn't know Phil. The two surfers have never met. All Liam knows is that, one moment, the guy is sitting on a surfboard. And the next, he's bobbing in the water, stunned.

Liam Ryan:

Just this huge fin comes up beside Phil, and you could see bits of his board just all scattered around, like little blocks of ice just sitting there.

Torah Kachur:

Liam witnesses every surfer's nightmare.

Liam Ryan:

As a surfer, you're always aware that there's sharks in the water, that you're part of the ecosystem, but you never think you're going to see a great white trying to eat a human being in front of you. And I don't think anything can prepare you for that.

Torah Kachur:

Everything feels like it's happening in slow motion.

Liam Ryan:

The silence of it was what unsettled me. No one was making any noise, and I started just to scream, "Help" or "Help him. Help, help now. He needs help."

Torah Kachur:

At this point, Liam and Jess are closer to the beach than they are to Phil. It would be easier and safer to paddle for the shore, but Liam doesn't do that. He does something I'm not sure all of us would do. He starts paddling towards Phil and a 16-foot great white shark, and he's not alone. Jess is right there with him.

Liam Ryan:

Without Jess there, I don't know how I would've felt. Probably, the first reaction would be to head in and get to safety myself. But when you've got someone there that you trust and know, you are in it together.

Torah Kachur:

Unbelievably, Liam and Jess aren't the only strangers coming to Phil's rescue. A third surfer, Alex Oliver, is also heading towards Phil. As they get closer, they realize what they're up against.

Liam Ryan:

I saw it's belly, I saw it's dorsal fin, and I just remember thinking to myself, "This thing, if it wanted to, could eat all of us in one bite."

Torah Kachur:

Liam, Jess and Alex have nothing but surfboards, their voices and a ton of courage. They paddle right up to the shark, splashing and screaming, hoping to scare the shark away.

Phil Mummert:

I remember seeing them coming towards me, and I just instantly went from being, "I'm dead here" to, "Oh, everything's going to be okay. These guys are here."

Torah Kachur:

By the time Liam, Jess and Alex get to Phil, the shark isn't visible, but there's no way of knowing if it's still around. They don't waste any time waiting to find out.

Liam Ryan:

Alex hopped off his board, slid it out towards Phil, and said, "Get on there, mate."

Torah Kachur:

As Phil gets on the board, they get their first look at the damage to his leg.

Liam Ryan:

Just had this huge cut, like a single knife slice from his knee to his bum. It was all open, and I just thought, "He's not going to make it."

Torah Kachur:

The shoreline is only about 150 feet away, but the shark could return at any moment. And now, Alex is in the water swimming and pushing Phil on his board into shore, with Jess and Liam on their boards, paddling their makeshift raft to safety.

Phil Mummert:

I just remember Alex just yelling, "Paddle, paddle, paddle."

Liam Ryan:

There was only one thing on my mind, "Get the hell to land as quick as you can. This animal is somewhere, and it could eat all of us for lunch."

Torah Kachur:

After the longest swim of their lives, they make it to the beach. A group of surfers have lined up waiting to help.

Phil Mummert:

One of the guys who was on the beach, as soon as I got to the shore, he just came down, and he just grabbed my leg and just clamped his hands around it.

Torah Kachur:

Phil's in shock, but he's got one thing on his mind.

Liam Ryan:

"Can you please tell my Mrs.? She's down there with the dog." I remember thinking that "This is a special girl for you, if, after you've been bitten by a shark, you're still thinking of her."

Torah Kachur:

Liam takes off down the beach.

Liam Ryan:

I was just thinking, "Gee, this might be the guy's last moments. I don't know if he's going to survive. I need to tell this lady that she needs to come quick."

Torah Kachur:

On the way, Liam notices surfers still in the water.

Liam Ryan:

That just put me in panic mode. I started yelling and screaming and whistling and just waving with my arms. "Get in. Get in. Shark out there. Get the hell in."

Torah Kachur:

The surfers paddle in, and Liam takes off to find Mish. By the time he gets her back to Phil, the surfers have moved him up the beach. Phil's still lying face down on Alex's surfboard. The same guy still has his hands clamped around his leg. Jess and Alex are keeping him warm, keeping him talking, stopping him from looking at his leg.

Liam Ryan:

He was starting to shake a little bit, because of the loss of blood. I felt like I'd

kind of done what I could do, and I just, at that moment, I think it all sank in. I just walked off by myself for a little bit, and tears just started coming out of my eyes.

Torah Kachur:

The medics finally arrive, but Phil needs surgery, now. His best chance of survival is taking a helicopter to a major hospital. The group on the beach watches the helicopter fly off, everyone wondering if Phil would make it.

Liam Ryan:

In that moment, you're just thinking you're kind of grateful to be there and be alive, after seeing that.

Torah Kachur:

As things start to settle on the beach, Liam remembers his own surfboard.

Liam Ryan:

I looked out to ocean and just thought, "Well, I don't know where it is." And someone had lined all the boards up along the dunes, and I saw my board there. And "Oh, well, no worries."

Torah Kachur:

This small caring gesture stays with Liam.

Liam Ryan:

I think that's the surf community. It seemed like everyone knew their role. There was the ones of us who were close enough to help him out. The ones that headed in, they got to work straight away. Someone called the ambos, someone called the police, someone called marine safety, to get the guy the help that he needed.

Torah Kachur:

And someone rounded up all the surfboards.

Liam Ryan:

It made me realize that, whenever I surf, no matter who that person is that you're sitting next to in the lineup, they could be the person that saves your life.

Speaker 4:

Dr. Sean Cole, please report to maternity.

Torah Kachur:

Phil turns out to be lucky, or at least as lucky as someone attacked by a great white can be.

Phil Mummert:

One of the bites was one inch away from my femoral artery. So if that, obviously, had just been one inch closer, oh yeah, wouldn't have made it back to the beach.

Torah Kachur:

The surgery takes all night. When Phil wakes up...

Phil Mummert:

One of the nurses came in, and she was like, "Oh, have you walked yet?" And I was like, "Oh, I don't know. Can I? I don't know. Do I still have a leg? I don't even know."

Torah Kachur:

Miraculously, he does. It takes Phil months of rehab to heal and get strength back in his leg, but he knows he wouldn't be alive if not for Liam, Jess and Alex, three people he'd never met before that day.

Phil Mummert:

We're good mates now. We keep in touch quite a lot, all four of us. And yeah, we go out and have beers every now and then, and they're just an awesome group of guys.

Torah Kachur:

In fact, they've become so close that Liam will be giving a blessing at Phil and Mish's wedding.

Liam Ryan:

It's very humbling, because you just think, "I haven't done anything special. I've done what anyone else would've done. We just happened to be there and happened to be the ones who helped out."

Torah Kachur:

And every year, around the end of July, they all get together to mark that day, their shark anniversary.

Liam Ryan:

We've been introduced by a wild creature, and we're going to have to spend the rest of our lives knowing that we've been brought together by nature.

Torah Kachur:

All of them are still surfing, but with a little more caution and no hard feelings towards sharks.

Liam Ryan:

They're just a big fish looking for a feed. They're part of the ecosystem. And

every time we go out for a surf, we're in their kind of yard, and we borrow, if you like, the waves from them. And we're a good news story that Phil survived. And it shows you that, when people come together, amazing things can happen.

Torah Kachur:

Even though attacks like this one are extremely rare, they can stoke fear and make people feel unsafe in the water. The movies don't help. But advice from a shark expert might. Melissa Márquez is a marine scientist, currently based in Western Australia, where she studies great white sharks. I asked her to tell me about her favorite shark encounter.

Melissa Márquez:

Probably my absolute favorite shark encounter is one that happened in my home country. So I'm from Puerto Rico. And we have this incredible bay that is known for its bioluminescence. And in that bay, at night, you can see animals, because the bioluminescence just kind of illuminates everything. And I was filming for *National Geographic* and for Will Smith's *Welcome to Earth* series. And you can actually see me in this clear kayak, where I'm going around in the bay, looking at the different animals. And suddenly, this beautiful nurse shark comes and travels underneath my glass kayak. And if there was magic in the earth, it was in that bay in that moment with me, because it was just illuminating this gorgeous shark. It looked like it was flying through the cosmos, and that's a memory that I'm going to remember for the rest of my life.

Torah Kachur:

Now, a nurse shark is not something to be scared of, but have you ever had a scary experience?

Melissa Márquez:

Not with sharks, even though I've been working with them for quite a long time now. None of them have thought of me as food just yet. I guess I'm not very appetizing looking to them. But no, I've been lucky that I haven't had any negative encounters with sharks in my career so far.

Torah Kachur:

What's the biggest misconception about sharks?

Melissa Márquez:

That they're a monolith. That they're all man-eaters and they're mindless killers. And that's just not the case whatsoever. There's over 500 different species, but only about 34 of them have been implicated in some sort of shark bite. And so, I think it's really important that, when we talk about the risk associated with sharks, that we really put things into perspective. We are the bigger threat to sharks. Over one third of them are endangered with extinction at

this point, and the numbers just keep getting more and more dire for them. And so, it does worry me that this perception of sharks being these man-eaters and these killers is really almost putting people off of protecting these animals. But they're such an important part of our ecosystem that we can't afford to lose sharks, because without sharks, we don't have a healthy ocean. And if we don't have a healthy ocean, we don't have a healthy planet.

Torah Kachur:

But it's not easy for a lot of people to just let go of the fear. How do you tackle that?

Melissa Márquez:

When I do my science communication and outreach, I try to meet people where they're at. I don't just go in with the stats being like, "Oh, you shouldn't be afraid of sharks, because you have such a low risk." It's, "All right, what is your relationship with sharks? What do you see them as? What's your perception of them? If you're afraid of them, why? And let's talk a little bit about that." So it's meeting people where they're at and knowing also that you're not going to wipe people's fear of something right away.

Torah Kachur:

As part of that education and understanding what our risks really are, what are some of those precautions we should be taking, if we're swimming or surfing or just enjoying water, where sharks are very likely present?

Melissa Márquez:

So a lot of people ask me, "What's the surefire way of making sure you never get bit by a shark?" And that's staying out of the water. Plain and simple, stay out of the water if you don't want a single bit of a risk. So you've got to exercise a few different things of caution. One of them is always swimming with a buddy. And that's not just a shark mitigation kind of action. That's also just a swimmer safety action. Because what happens if you get a cramp? Or what happens if you get stuck out on a rip or something happens? It's good to have a buddy there to be able to help you out. But in the case of a shark, it's good, so that you and your buddy can actually keep an eye on the shark as you slowly make your way back to shore, if that is what ends up happening.

Torah Kachur:

Are there any particular areas or activities that are especially attractive to sharks?

Melissa Márquez:

If you see someone, say, down current or up current and they're fishing, that's like a free dinner bell for sharks right there. Don't get me wrong, they've been around for millions of years, and they are very good at what they do, in regards to being predators, but they can also have a cheeky, lazy day. And

someone fishing and throwing fish overboard or dead scraps overboard, that's like go out and throw a McDonald's driveway for them. It's so easy. And they would not say no to that. So if you see any sort of activity that might attract sharks in the area, might be best to kind of get out for a little bit or until that person is finished and then, wait a little bit longer.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people. And if you want to share your own story about a stranger who showed up for you at just the right moment, look for a link at onstar.com. Or if you're listening on Spotify, check out the Q&A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others, in big ways and small. And while you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us on your podcast platform or share this with someone who would enjoy it.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur, and please be safe out there.

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