

Hi Andrew,

I hope you are well. I'm not sure if you'll remember me, my name is John Withington and you taught me Wilderness First Aid in Selati in November (we had a big party on the last night!) as part of a one year EcoTraining course.

I wanted to let you know something. I am now on a lodge placement at a reserve in North West Limpopo that I started at just over two weeks ago. My immediate boss, Ludi, was also trained by you. On Tuesday night we were first responders on a crocodile attack that occurred on one of the workers on the reserve. The casualty had multiple serious lacerations to his right leg and Ludi & I had to treat him for over 3 hours before we could get him to a private hospital 150km away. He is doing well now and he will hopefully not need an amputation but it's going to be a long time, if ever, before he has full use of the leg again.

I'm sure we didn't do everything perfectly but I think the training that you gave us may well have helped save his life so I wanted to thank you very much for doing the work you do – it really does make a difference. Incidentally as a result of what happened on Tuesday the reserve is looking into improving their readiness for such emergencies in the future, including getting more people first aid trained so I have given them your details.

If you are interested in a more detailed account (it's very long!), I have copied below an extract from an email I sent to my Mum & Dad yesterday telling them about what happened. You may be pleased to know that I used the latex gloves from the CPR pouch that you gave us (I carry it on me 24/7!).

All the best

John Withington

“Two Zimbabwean workers on the reserve, Knowledge and Norman, got attacked by a Crocodile on the reserve last night. At about 18:30 (shortly before sunset) one guy, Knowledge, got attacked by the a crocodile on a spot on the reserve (we as yet don't know how this happened but suspect he may have been fishing in the river which he's not allowed to do because of the crocodiles around). Having heard a scream Norman grabbed a Panga (basically a machete) and ran to where he heard the scream from. Seeing that a big crocodile had a hold of Knowledge in the river he jumped in to try and help him. A bunch of other workers just stood on the side shouting. As he got to the Crocodile it turned and attacked Norman. Knowledge has some injuries but will be okay, whereas Norman has done some serious damage to his leg. Anyway this is how it panned out from my perspective...

At 7.15pm, and therefore now dark, I was sitting in the conference centre at the game reserve where I work trying to connect to the internet. My boss (Ludi) bursts in and says words to the effect of “John, I need your first aid skills Norman has been attacked by a crocodile”. Ludi and me are the only first aid trained people on the reserve and I did my training more recently than her so she knew my knowledge would be fresher. So I ran to tell the lodge manager to briefly tell him what had happened and to tell him to stay by the radio to wait for our instructions.

I'm met by Chris (Reserve Manager) in a Land Rover out the back and we drive along the dirt roads at ridiculous speed about two kilometres to the area where the attack has happened. The bush is

incredibly thick and the grass really long, but we have torches to help but we're getting cut to pieces. We (including about half a dozen of the Zimbabwean reserve workers) make it down to the water's edge and are shouting out to Norman to find out where he is. He's on a big island in the river – when he managed to escape from the crocodile the island side was closest. In order to get to him we need to cross about 10-15 metres of water in the dark – Chris has a handgun with him but it's of minimal use in the dark and we can hear occasional movement from the water – the crocodile(s) we assume. We shout to Norman to find out the extent of his injuries and therefore how urgent it is to get to him immediately and he basically tells us he has one leg and the Crocodile death rolled him multiple times with his leg in his mouth. So we have to get to him now so we're crossing the water as a group. We find a shallower point about 50 metres along from where Norman is. Chris tells me that I don't need to come and he only needs his workers – to which I say "Are you first aid trained?" to which he says "No" so I told him I was coming. Chris fires the handgun into the water a few times and we cross the river, it's up to about my waist and everyone makes it. It was one of the most scary things I've ever done – I was expecting to get nailed by a Crocodile, as I think everyone was. Anyway on the other side the bush is completely impenetrable and we can't get to Norman. So we have no choice but to cross back to the other side of the river and find another route. We all cross the river again and thankfully we all make it. There were no other options or we would have taken them.

Back on the other side I spotlight Norman with my torch and we throw a torch to him. We ask him if he's able to move and he says he can. So we get him to move further along the river bank but it's no use as the water is not getting any shallower. Chris tells me to go back to the car and ask Ludi to call the emergency services (Ludi was back at the car coordinating more help – mobile reception was patchy and the battery on the radio was dying, luckily we were found by help as we couldn't communicate where we were). As Norman can move, I took a view that he doesn't have a spinal injury so the other guys will be able to rescue him and I don't need to cross the water again so I do what Chris asks me to. While I'm at the car, Chris and another guy cross the river and using their bare hands (I've seen their hands afterwards) to rip through thick bush to get to Norman and they manage to carry him back across the river and up to the car.

I help lift him in to the back of the car and Ludi passes me some Perspex gloves to put on but in my haste I rip my hand straight through one of them and it's the only gloves we have. But THANKFULLY I have my CPR kit in my pocket (I have it with me 24/7) that our instructor gave us on the first aid course in December which has a pair of gloves in it!!! He has three extremely large wounds (flesh hanging out basically) to his left leg and has lost a lot of blood. Between me and Ludi we wrap multiple bandages tightly around his legs and tie them off. I keep applying pressure to the wounds and pinch the artery in his thigh and we raise his leg. We then drive him back to the lodge with me staying in the back of the car with him, treating him as much as I can.

At the lodge we carry him onto a massive table in the conference room. I climb on the table with him and continue treating him. He's conscious and talking but obviously in a lot of pain and needs emergency treatment. Meanwhile where we are taking him is being organised by the others. A Government ambulance from the local town, Alldays, is on its way but the guys don't believe they will have the capabilities to treat him. So permission is got from the boss in Cape Town to take him to a private hospital in Louis Trichardt about 150km away and the company will pay for emergency treatment. We carry Norman into the back of a Land Rover Discovery with the back seats folded down – Chris drives, Ludi is in the passenger seat and I'm in the back with Norman. We use the spare tyre and some towels to prop his leg up and I'm putting pressure on the wounds/pinching the artery.

We drive at high speed with hazard lights on to Louis Trichardt. After about 10 minutes we are met by two government ambulances and explain that we are taking Norman to a private hospital but there is another casualty at the lodge. I witness the most incompetent paramedics I've ever seen (I think there were six of them but I didn't get out of the car as was tending to Norman). One of the paramedics asks if he can just quickly put a drip on Norman to help him on the journey as he's lost blood, we let him but the guy can't even get a vein for ages. In the meantime I am asking the other guys if they can just check what I am doing in terms of stemming the flow of blood (is the leg high enough, am I pinching the artery correctly)... but he's too interested in chatting on his mobile!!! I shout at him but he can tell me nothing. When I finally have his attention he tells me he wants to look at the wounds – I tell him not a chance, he's bandaged up and we've managed to stop the blood flow, Norman is conscious and stable so we'll wait for Louis Trichardt. The other dude eventually get the drip attached but it's all a waste of time as we can't hold the drip high enough in the car for it work properly – or at least the paramedic didn't have the skills to make it work in a makeshift way. We basically waste about 20 minutes FOR NOTHING and incidentally both ambulances stayed with us despite Chris pleading for one of them to go on to help Knowledge. By the way the only painkiller they had was Aspirin which was no good as it thins the blood!! What a joke.

We then speed on to Louis Trichardt and I keep treating the wounds and keep Norman talking to me. I occasionally pinch his toe to make sure I wasn't cutting off his circulation too bad (which he hated me for!). We eventually reach the emergency room at 11pm and Norman is immediately treated. I am smothered in his blood but it's the least of my worries. After some time the doctor comes out and tells us the situation. Norman is stable, he's been very fortunate in that the bites have missed his major arteries – not by much though. They've sedated him and he's been cleaned and stitched up but he will get an infection in his wounds so he's on strong antibiotics. He's unlikely to need to have his leg amputated but he's going to need repeated surgery over the next 6 months as he's lost a lot of muscle and ligaments, even then he may never get full use of his leg again. He's alive though, which a few hours earlier looked unlikely so we're very grateful.

I think we leave the hospital around 1am and we all stay at Ludi's parents who live in Louis Trichardt. After some food and some well earned beers to help us relax we go to bed about 2.30am. None of us sleep, it was impossible to relax and by 7.30am we're up again. I borrow some clean clothes and we head to the hospital to see Norman. He's awake and in good spirits, and we try to be positive about his leg. Long story short, we're with him most of the time until about 1.30pm when he got transferred to another town, Zenine, where there is a specialist who will start his course of surgery first thing tomorrow.

It was the most insane night of my life but I'm so grateful for the First Aid training we had as it helped and I was able to stay calm because of it. Incidentally, Norman is a really nice guy and will do anything for anyone hence why he got into the mess in first place! I understand Knowledge is in a clinic in Alldays and will be okay.

Anyway, I just thought I should tell you. Don't worry. I hope you don't think I'm stupid for going into that water – we thought about it calmly and decided we had no alternative, the only other option was to let Norman bleed to death.

I have some photos of my blood stained clothes and with Norman in the hospital today but none of the gore, I had other things to deal with! It was gruesome though.”