

# Hunting For 'The Man In The Gray Suit'

"Sometimes you eat the bear.  
Sometimes the bear eats you."

—Old Mountain Saying

BY ERIC CARLSON

It was one of those thick, gray mornings when every damp blast of salt air says, "Stay inside. Curl up on the couch. Watch something stupid on TV."

Not the kind of day you would choose for doing battle with one of the most frightening creatures on earth. But you can't always wait for just the right time. I said to myself. Otherwise, all you'll ever do is wait.

As I pulled into the parking lot at Hughes Marina, a sliver of sunlight peeked under the curtain of clouds and bounced off the Shallotte River to silhouette a monstrous form splayed out across three picnic tables.

So this is what we would be hunting, I thought as I lifted the blue plastic tarp and stared into the face of a giant, 13-foot tiger shark.

"They brought her in last night," said a voice behind me. "Weighed in at 937 pounds. Pulled them three miles out to sea. Took 'em all afternoon to get back. Lost their steering. Almost lost the prop. The engine overheated. Had to pump bilge water in to keep it from blowing up. They brought it in, though."

"Guess that's what matters," I suggested.

"You bet," he said. "You going out on the *Wavedancer*?"

"Supposed to," I replied. "That is, if they plan to fish in this kind of weather."

"They go out in anything," he said.

He told me about last year's Poor Boy Shark Tournament, when *Wavedancer's* owner Dave Smith Jr. and crewman Bob Edwards hooked a REALLY big fish near Bald Head Island. He described how the shark dragged the boat all night and half the day; first up the Cape Fear River, then out to sea.

"There's a poem about it on the wall inside," he said.

Staring at the half ton of muscle, cartilage and teeth, I began to doubt the wisdom of this adventure. Reading the enshrined couplets about *Wavedancer's* previous escapades didn't lessen my foreboding:

"...Time after time it came to mind,

Just how big is the shark on the end of the line?

By now the brave crew could no longer see land,

But they continue to fight as hard as they can.

Ten miles, twelve miles, fourteen and more,

Just how far will he pull them from shore?..."

A pretty blonde woman tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was the reporter from the *Beacon*. Assured that I was, she introduced herself as Jayne Smith and said the *Wavedancer* was still at the dock. Her husband and son were making some repairs.

"They got hit by a barge last



STAFF PHOTOS BY ERIC CARLSON  
**THE WINNING FISH** in this year's 12th annual Poor Boy Shark Tournament dwarfs onlookers at Hughes Marina. The 13-foot, 937 lb. tiger shark was caught about eight miles off Southport.

night," she said. "Smashed up the bow. Tore up some rods. Knocked out the electronics. Dave's got nine stitches in his head."

She related this horrifying story with no more concern than you might hear from someone talking about a flat tire they got on the way home from work.

"Well, I guess we won't be going out today," I said, somewhat relieved.

She gave me a "You must be kidding" look that told me my hopes of an easy escape were a trifle premature.

"Let's go," she said and tossed my bag into her car.

Inside the Smiths' vacation home at Gause Landing, the walls are covered with photographs and clippings that document three generations of offshore sport fishing.

David Smith Sr., David Jr. and

David III are pictured standing beside numerous sharks, of various types and sizes, hanging up by their tails. One article describes *Wavedancer's* victory in an earlier Poor Boy Tournament. Another clipping tells of the night they made it safely back to shore after being hit by another boat miles at sea.

But it was a photo of the boat itself that convinced me to go along. It showed *Wavedancer* banked into

a high-speed turn, spray flying and rods ready, painted a bright blue, its bow ablaze with a menacing red mouth lined with giant white teeth—like one of those P-40 fighter planes from World War II.

One look at that fearsome grin told me that these guys were serious shark hunters. And if I wanted to find out what shark fishing was all about, this was definitely the boat to be on.

As they say in Alaska, "If you're gonna be a bear, you might as well be a grizzly."

Bearing this in mind, I sauntered down to the dock and found Dave III repairing the previous night's damage. He had just installed a new VHF antenna and was busy caulking the smashed-in bow above *Wavedancer's* leering jaws.

"You still you want to go out with us after what happened last night?" he said.

"Sure," I said, displaying the proper mix of bravery and stupidity I thought should accompany such an answer. "You've already had your bad luck for this tournament."

He seemed to like that reply and showed me where to stash my camera bag. He also apologized for not tidying up the gear strewn about the cabin or the blood splattered on the deck from the gash in his father's head.

"No problem," I said. "It's not every night you get hit by a barge."

Considering that possibility, I asked hopefully, "Is it?"

Just then a whirlwind of energy came lumbering down the gangway carrying a shiny new Danforth anchor and 150 feet of nylon line. The old rode had snapped like a thread when the massive barge slammed into *Wavedancer* and sent it scragging down the length of its black steel hull.

With a white gauze bandage wrapped around his head, Dave Jr. looked like he should have been playing a flute and marching along with a drummer and flag bearer, like that patriotic trio in the Revolutionary War painting. In this case it was Jayne Smith and fishing buddy Bob Edwards carrying more gear and spare parts.

Dave Jr. gave me that same "You sure you wanna do this?" look that I got from his son and immediately went to work bending the damaged rod holders back into place. Jayne helped load more stuff onto the boat and reminded her wounded husband that the Coast Guard wanted more information about the barge mishap.

"We'll talk to them later," Dave said as he fired up the big Evinrude. "We've already lost a half day's fishing."

As *Wavedancer* crashed through the rolling swells in Shallotte Inlet, it quickly became obvious that this was going to be a rough trip. Tossing and turning in a white-capped sea, we anchored a few miles offshore and got ready to fish.

With the deliberate precision  
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