

ACTIVITY: Swimming

CASE: GSAF 1883.09.14.R

DATE: Reported September 14, 1883
(probable date was Ca 1843)

LOCATION: Between Port Arthur and the Forestier Peninsula, Tasmania, Australia.

NAME: Owen

DESCRIPTION: He was a bush-ranger, one of the escaped convicts fleeing the penal settlement at Port Arthur. Most bushrangers stole supplies from remote settlements and travelers and fenced the stolen goods to other free settlers. Bushranging was common on mainland Australia, but Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) produced the most violent convict bushrangers. So many roamed the bush that farms were abandoned and martial law was proclaimed.



BACKGROUND

ENVIRONMENT: Port Arthur was a convict settlement on the Tasman Peninsula. It was located about 60 km south east of Hobart.

NARRATIVE: Owen had escaped from Port Arthur and while swimming to Forrester's Peninsula he was "cut in two by a shark," reported fellow-escapee John Connell.

INJURY: Fatal

SPECIES: Not identified

CASE INVESTIGATOR ASSESSMENT: It is interesting to me that the 'probable date' of this incident is recorded as 'CA 1843'. If this is correct, then it is possible that John Connell's testimony is a conflation of a separate (historically verified) Port Arthur convict abscondment story from 1842. Notwithstanding the different names (and numbers) of the protagonists, a number of the narrative elements of both stories seem to match. I did not uncover any reference to Connell's story during my Tasmanian research for *White Pointer South* but wish I had as it would have supplemented the following excerpt from my book admirably (if true). In any event, I include it as useful background information on the history of Port Arthur and the conditions that prevailed at Eaglehawk Neck in those times. The story from 1842 mentioned above, comprises the last paragraph of this excerpt:

'GUARD DOGS OF THE SEA – Concurrent with the growing incidence of sea-bathing, the military authorities in Van Diemen's Land theorised that sharks could perhaps be enlisted as an instrument of penal enforcement (*G. P. Whitley – Fishes of Australia Part 1 – The Sharks, Rays, Devil Fish, and Other Primitive Fishes of Australia and New Zealand, 1940*).

Governor George Arthur had decreed that the prison settlements of Macquarie Harbour and Maria Island were to be closed for reasons of economy and security. A new combined prison would be built on the geographically isolated Tasman Peninsula and in 1830 construction commenced at the site of the now infamous Port Arthur.

By 1832 the new prison settlement was operational and populated with some of the worst offenders within the penal system. During the building phase in 1831, several convicts had successfully escaped across the narrow strip of land at Eaglehawk Neck, the only land route off the Peninsula. In response, a guard station was quickly established on the neck in the same year, marking the commencement of a veritable arms race of escape methodology versus deterrence strategy.

Convicts continued to abscond across the neck using the scrubby vegetation as cover, prompting the commander of the guard to install nine tethered guard dogs across the hundred yard wide land bridge in 1832. A line of oil lamps was also erected to light the escape route at night and the designer of the 'dogline', John Peyton Jones, ingeniously covered the ground with white cockle shells in order to maximise the illumination of the area.

In 1833 Charles O'Hara Booth took command of the Tasman Peninsula with a detachment of soldiers and immediately increased the guard at Eaglehawk Neck to twenty-five men. To house them, he added sentry boxes and a guardhouse and also doubled the number of dogs. Convicts with aspirations of freedom were now obliged to walk out into the water under the cover of darkness in an effort to avoid the heavily armed guards. To deter errant night-waders, the watch deployed still more guard dogs who spent their miserable existences chained to platforms built out into the water. Subsequently, the only possible course left open to convict runaways was to swim out into deep water in an attempt to bypass the bristling security measures on shore.

Upon this last remaining option for escape being identified, the neck guard (as legend has it) sourced offal from an abattoir on the nearby Forestier Peninsula and routinely dumped it off the beaches at Eaglehawk Neck in a deliberate attempt to lure sharks close inshore (*Robert Hughes – The Fatal Shore, 1987*). As intended, the waters of the Tasman Peninsula were soon widely reputed to be shark infested and any attempt to escape penal servitude via the sea was perceived by many as suicidal.

A visitor to the Tasman Peninsula, Godfrey Charles Mundy, recorded his impressions of the security measures at Eaglehawk Neck in *Our Antipodes*, published in 1852:

... on either shore of the inlet running up to the [military] station there is a chain of huts, each containing a constable and his dog, to prevent the escape of runaways by swimming this arm of the sea, a desperate measure, since the fugitive fortunate enough to evade the tipstaff and the mastiff would have to battle the watch with an outlying piquet of sharks, abounding in these waters.

For all intents and purposes the island's sharks had been deputised, their natural tendency to patrol the coastal waters of the peninsula commandeered under martial law and used as a potent deterrent to would-be escapees.

When the convicts Martin Cash, Lawrence Kavanagh, and George Jones made a daring escape from Port Arthur in 1842, they were forced to risk the waters of Eaglehawk Neck. During their swim to freedom, Cash was separated from his comrades and it is telling that his first instinct was to believe they had been taken by sharks. Although the three were eventually reunited on the far shore and made good their escape, it is testimony to either their courage or desperation that all had dared to swim across a stretch of water which they firmly believed to be shark infested. Very few convicts were willing to run the gauntlet of the 'guard dogs of the sea' at Eaglehawk Neck as Cash, Jones and Kavanagh had done. This aspect of the escape only served to enhance their reputations among their peers when the three bushrangers were eventually recaptured several months later. After all, any man dauntless enough to face the legendary sharks of the neck deserved the respect of every man.'

SOURCE: Black C. – *White Pointer South* PG 5, Wellington Bridge Press 2010.

Whether or not Connell's tale of Owen and the shark is a conflation of this story is unknown and requires further research.

CASE INVESTIGATOR: Chris Black, Global Shark Accident File

A CAREER OF CRIME.

At a late hour on Tuesday night an elderly man of herculean frame, but who nevertheless looked sick and tired of his life, and who bore the impress of concealed trouble on his brow, entered the Central Police Station, and stated in a haggard voice that he wished to see the officer in charge. Sergeant Scott referred him to Detective Tindall, to whom he stated that he wished to give himself up as an escaped convict and a would-be murderer. The detective looked at the man in astonishment; but, as he appeared to have all his senses about him, asked him to state exactly the charge on which he wished to give himself up. The man said it was a long story, and Detective Tindall then took him into a private room, and as he narrated his history took the chief points of it down in writing. Briefly they are as follows:—He gives his name as John Connell, but to this he has tacked seven or eight aliases. As long ago as 1840 he was well known in Victoria—so says his narration—as a criminal; but, crossing the border in that year, he and a mate named Owen stuck up a settler's house near Berrima, but were soon captured by the police. They were then tried and sentenced to a long term of penal servitude, and removed to Port Arthur in Tasmania. After remaining here for two or three years Connell and Owen and three others made their escape, but, while swimming to Forrester's Peninsula, Owen was cut in two by a shark. Connell and the others were recaptured, and being taken back each received 100 lashes and twelve months "on the logs." Again Connell tried to escape, but was again recaptured, and had to undergo a considerable term of solitary confinement. He finished his sentence at Port

Arthur and then crossed over to Victoria, where in company with a notorious bush-ranger named Sullivan he stuck up Jones's station at Terra Yarra, robbing the place of about £100 in cash and a number of other things. There was a hue and cry and a hunt by the police, and again was Connell captured as well as Sullivan. They were committed to take their trial at Portland Bay. They travelled overland in custody of the police to this place, and one day's journey from it stopped at a bush shanty. While laying on the floor handcuffed at this place Connell noticed a pair of handcuffs just above his head with a key in them. He succeeded in gaining possession of this key, and soon freed himself from his own bracelets. He then obtained possession of a horse pistol hanging on the wall, and was about to leave the place when he was confronted by Sergeant Cadoll, who called upon him to stand; but instead of doing so, Connell fired point blank at him, and rushed from the shanty, the officer falling to the ground as if shot. Whether the injury was a serious one or not Connell says he does not know, but he does not think it could have been fatal, or he must have heard of it. Since that time he has been on various diggings, and lived every kind of a vagabond life, but was never after in the hands of the police. He says he is tired of life, and was determined to make confession before he died. On Wednesday he was examined by Dr Egan, who said, "Oh, he's mad," to which Connell retorted "No more mad than you are, doctor." He was afterwards brought before Mr Crane, at the Central police court, and remanded for further inquiry.—'Town and Country,' September 1st.

Bruce Herald, September 14, 1883, page 5