

ACTIVITY: Bathing / swimming
CASE: [GSAF 1907.10.18.R](#)
DATE: Reported October 18, 1907
LOCATION: Near Thursday Island, Torres Straits, Australia

NAME: Unknown
DESCRIPTION: He was one of the crew of the lugger *Teazer*.

BACKGROUND

Thornton McCamish provides a description of Thursday Island and life aboard the luggers in *The Monthly*:

“Pearl-shellers first appeared in the Strait in the 1860s, and for the next hundred years the industry cycled through booms and busts. Thursday Island was only established as an administrative base in 1879, but by 1885 it had become a thriving entrepot crowded with the workers – Malays, Chinese, Japanese and Pacific Islanders – who created the rich ethnic diversity of today’s islands.

From the safe distance of a 21st-century bar stool, there’s a certain romance to all this. The luggers were beautiful boats; the divers used the old-school helmets you see Tintin wearing. But it was a brutal business. Many Islanders were press-ganged into work as deck crew on luggers crawling with rats. Divers risked shark attack and suffered agonising, sometimes fatal, episodes of the bends. And as people and money poured in, Thursday Island became notorious for the tough pearl-boat crews, the knifings in the alleys, the drunken sprees. As late as the 1920s, trinket-hunters could buy shrunken human heads that came from PNG if they asked around.”

NARRATIVE: No details

INJURY: Fatal

SPECIES: Not recorded

SOURCES: The Queenslander, Saturday October 26, 1907, page 10; The Monthly, <http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2014/october/1412085600/thornton-mccamish/island-time>



*Pearling lugger in the Torres Strait.
State Library of Queensland.*

THURSDAY ISLAND, October 21.
A report was brought here last Friday that a Papuan native, one of the crew of the lugger *Teazer*, while bathing after working at the pump, was taken by a shark. Detective Head to-day arrested three Japanese, who had been working on the lugger, it being reported that one of the Japanese had tomahawked a Papuan, knocked him overboard, and then held him under water until he was dead.

Pearling Luggers of the Torres Strait

The luggers were gaff-rigged ketches constructed of wood, and many have continued to sail for more than 60 years. Typically measuring 15 to 20 meters in length, with low waists and bulwarks to assist diving, the two-masted pearling luggers were graceful with curved lines. They were a magnificent sight as they entered the open sea under full sail. There were many hundreds of luggers working across the north of Australia, from Thursday Island to Broome. Many of the luggers were built by Japanese shipwrights on Thursday Island. Indeed, by the turn of the century, the Japanese had a monopoly on the shipbuilding and slipways of the island.



*Pearling luggers at Thursday Island.
State Library of Queensland.*

Typically, a pearling lugger had two or three divers, two or three tenders to operate the air pumps, a cook, an engineer and two sailing crew. The divers, who were mostly Japanese, risked their lives in rubberised canvas suits, heavy boots laden with lead, and helmets with thick glass. The divers were paid according to the amount of shell they collected, so every minute on the bottom was precious.

Their lives were in the hands of the tenders above, who operated the air pumps to keep them alive. Initially, pearl shell was easily located in shallow waters. However, by 1871, a diving suit was designed, allowing access down to 20 fathoms. As the pearl shell was collected over many years, the remaining shell deposits were at increasingly greater depths, and by the end of the 1930s, divers were going down to 40 fathoms in areas such as the Darnley Deeps. Few Australians could be attracted to the perilous occupation of pearl diving. The bends killed many of the divers, as did shark attacks. In 1916, the official death rate in workplaces in Queensland was reported as 1.1% of the workforce, contrasting with the 10% quoted for pearling divers. Cyclones were also a threat to the safety of the pearling fleets, with one cyclone in 1899 sinking more than 50 luggers, and killing 300 men.

During World War Two, the pearling luggers were requisitioned by the Australian Navy, as the islands of the Torres Strait became strategically very important. Many were used by the Americans, patrolling the Torres Strait. The residents of the islands were evacuated from 1942 until 1946. After the war, it was difficult for the industry to rebuild, and the introduction of plastics made the industry less viable, causing many luggers to be sold and refitted for prawning, crayfishing or other commercial activities. Some pearling continued until the 1970s, with the introduction of cultured pearling.

The sailing boats once used to trawl for the treasures of the sea are a reminder of Queensland's past. Resilient craft, many of the pearling luggers were refloated, refitted and continued to sail many years after the pearling industry had become a remnant of our history.

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<http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/slq-today/2014/11/19/pearling-luggers-of-the-torres-strait/>