

**ACTIVITY:** Swimming from a rowing skiff to shore.

**CASE:** GSAF 1923.06.16

**DATE:** Saturday June 16, 1923

**LOCATION:** The incident took place at Bellambi Reef, New South Wales, Australia.

**NAME:** Joseph Rigby

**DESCRIPTION:** He was a good swimmer.

**BOAT:** A rowing skiff.



John Hatwell, Australia  
Gday Pty Ltd

*Bellambi Beach, New South Wales*

### **BACKGROUND**

**MOON PHASE:** New Moon, June 14, 1923

**SEA CONDITIONS:** The sea was calm.

**ENVIRONMENT:** The area was said to be “infested” with sharks at this time of year.

**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** Two miles

**TIME:** Afternoon

**NARRATIVE:** Four miners — J. Rigby, B. Powell, G. Clarke and J. Butler — were fishing when they noticed a disturbance in the water. Ahead was a school of sharks making straight for their boat. The men tried to maneuver the boat out of the way when they saw a dorsal fin dart beneath them. The boat shuddered and the next instant a gaping hole was ripped in the bottom. The boat heeled, filled with water, and wallowed, with the men struggling to cling to its side. One of them, J. Rigby, a good swimmer, volunteered to swim to shore. He had only gone about 20 yards when he gave a cry and disappeared. Another man also tried to swim ashore, but the lines of the boat became entangled in his legs, and a second man became exhausted and sank. The lone survivor, John Butler, was rescued by the collier *Kurrara* which was unable to locate any of the other missing men.

A week later another fishing boat in the same area was attacked by a shark but the occupants, F. Bradley and E. Christenson, were not injured.

**INJURY:** Fatal. Presumed taken by a shark.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** Not identified

**SOURCES:** Sydney Morning Herald, Tuesday July 5, 1927, page 1; Northern Territory Times and Gazette (Darwin, NT) Tuesday June 19, 1923, page 2; Victor M. Coppelson (1933); G.P. Whitley; Victor M. Coppelson (1958), page 185.

A shocking tragedy occurred off Wollongong on Saturday through the overturning of a small sailing skiff by a shoal of sharks, involving the death of three men named George Clarke, Joseph Rigby and Garnet Powell (miners employed in the South Coast Colliery.) Another occupant of the boat, John Butler was rescued.

# SHARKS CAPSIZE BOAT.

## THREE MEN DISAPPEAR.

### FOURTH RESCUED BY COLLIER.

#### Horror on N.S.W. Coast.

SYDNEY, Sunday. — A shocking tragedy involving the death of three men, through the overturning of a small sailing boat by a shoal of sharks, occurred off Wollongong on Saturday night. A fourth occupant of the boat was rescued by a passing collier after undergoing extreme physical and mental suffering for several hours. The victims of the tragedy were:—

#### Drowned.

GEORGE CLARKE, aged 36 years, of Woonoona.

JOSEPH RIGBY, aged 30 years, of Corrimal.

GARNETT POWELL, aged 35 years, of Woonoona.

#### Rescued.

JOHN BUTLER, aged 40 years, of Woonoona.

The four men were miners employed at the South Coast collieries and have been mates for years. It was their practice to utilise their Saturday mornings in fishing, and with this end in view they left Bellambi at about 7 o'clock on Saturday morning in a 14-ft. skiff. They sailed to a point about a mile and a half from the shore and anchored near the Bellambi reef. They had been fishing for some time, when suddenly something struck the boat and overturned it. The four men were thrown into the water and they found it impossible to right the craft. They had seen sharks around them be-

fore the boat was capsized, but the attack came before they could escape from the scene of danger. Only Rigby and Butler could swim and they decided to try to swim to the shore, nearly two miles away, to obtain help. They shook hands and set off, but Butler found himself entangled in the fishing lines and was forced to return to the boat to which Powell and Clarke were clinging. Rigby had not gone far when the other men heard him utter a cry and saw him disappear. Clarke then became exhausted. Several times he was helped on to the boat by Butler, but once the boat turned over and Clarke sank.

#### Survivor's Desperate Plight.

Powell and Butler were left clinging to the skiff, vainly endeavouring to right it. An attempt was made to plug a hole in the stern which had been torn by the attack of a shark. While Butler was engaged on this Powell disappeared.

By now Butler was thoroughly exhausted. Luckily the boat righted itself and he climbed in by holding on to the fishing lines. He managed to stand up and wave his shirt to attract attention. The collier Kurrara left Wollongong shortly before 1 o'clock, and when the vessel was about half way between the port and Bellambi reef Butler was observed balanced on the boat and waving his shirt. The Kurrara immediately steamed in his direction. A boat was lowered, and Butler, in an exhausted condition, was taken aboard. He was given food and clothing and later placed aboard a fishing smack, which took him to Wollongong. Butler's experience was terrifying, as he underwent great mental stress and suffered from his exertion to keep himself afloat.

It is thought that the three victims were taken by sharks, but a watch is being kept along the coast in case their bodies are washed up.

All four men were married and had large families. Powell was employed at the Coalcliff Colliery and the other men at South Bulli.

*The Argus (Melbourne, Victoria), Monday June 18, 1923, page 9*

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## SHARK ATTACKS.

### On Fishing Boats.

#### TERRIFYING EXPERIENCES.

Two young men, L. Gordon and T. Kemp, who were fishing in a fourteen-foot boat off Bellambi Reef, on the South Coast, on Sunday afternoon, had a terrifying experience.

They had not been fishing long when they felt a severe bump under the keel of the boat, and looking over the side they saw the disappearing form of a large shark.

The youths immediately pulled in their lines and rowed another quarter of a mile or so nearer the shore before again commencing to fish.

The boat had not been in its new position long before its occupants again felt a terrific blow on the boat, so severe that the bow lifted two feet out of the water, and a sheet of spray was thrown high into the air. This was seen by fishermen on the beach a few hundred yards away. Again the huge body of the monster was seen by the youths, who, without further ado, pulled for the shore as fast as they could. The monster had apparently followed the boat in from its former position.

This is not the first time that a shark has attacked fishing boats in the same vicinity. On June 15, 1923, a boat containing four men, J. Rigby, E. Powell, G. Clarke, and J. Butler, was attacked by a huge shark. Three of the men were thrown into the water, and their bodies were never seen again. Butler, who remained in the boat, was the only survivor. A week later another fishing boat in the same locality was attacked by a shark, but this time the occupants, F. Bradley and E. Christensen, escaped.

Constable Armstrong, of Bellambi, who searched the beach for the bodies of the victims of the disaster when the three men were lost, believes that another tragedy, when a boat which had contained a solitary fisherman was washed up on the beach, was due to the same cause. He also believes that it is the same shark which has made all the attacks, and says that he has seen the monster on many occasions. It is about 12 to 14 feet long, and he believes that it is of the brown whaler species.

*Sydney Morning Herald,  
Tuesday July 5, 1927, page 11*