

ACTIVITY: Swimming

CASE: [GSAF 1936.06.26](#)

DATE: Friday June 26, 1936

LOCATION: The incident took place at Nepean Island, near Thursday Island, Torres Strait, Queensland, Australia. 9°34'S.

NAME: Willie

DESCRIPTION: He was a 16-year-old male, an “aboriginal diver”.

BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: First Quarter, June 26, 1936

TIME 13h00

NARRATIVE: Several boys were free diving for trochus shell out of a dinghy. One of them, Cockatoo, was standing up to his neck in the water when he saw a shark rushing at him. He went to the bottom and the shark followed, but Cockatoo sheltered against the reef, close enough to touch the shark. The shark returned to the surface and Cockatoo followed, and saw Willie attacked. Willie was swimming on the surface and unaware of the shark until it bit him.

INJURY: Fatal. Willie was pulled into the dinghy where he said, “Good-bye all my countrymen. God bless you” and died.

SPECIES INVOLVED: Said to involve a tiger shark, 2.4 metres [8'] in length.

SOURCES: Cairns Post, Tuesday July 7, 1936, page 6; Sydney Morning Herald, Tuesday July 7, 1936; Courier Mail, July 7, 1936, page 15; G.P. Whitley (1940), The Fishes of Australia, Part 1; Victor M. Coppleson (1958), page 244

1936. 26th June.

WILLIE, 16 years. Aboriginal trochus skin diver. Nepean Island. Lat. 9° 34'S. Fatal.

Several boys swimming for trochus out of a dinghy. One of them, Cocatoo, standing up to neck in water, saw shark 8 feet long rushing at him. He went to bottom. Shark followed, but he sheltered against reef, close enough to touch the shark. Shark returned to the surface and Cocatoo followed, and saw Willie being attacked. Willie who was swimming on the surface of the water did not see the shark. Willie was pulled into the dinghy where he said, “Good-bye all my countrymen, God bless you” and died.

1936. 7th July.

ABORIGINAL DIVER. No details. Admitted Thursday Island Hospital.

SHARK ATTACK.

MISSION BOY KILLED.

NEPEAN ISLAND REEF.

"Good-bye to my countrymen. God bless you!"

Gasping out these pathetic words, 16 year-old aboriginal Willie, employed at the Aurukun Mission, died in the arms of two compatriots in a dinghy off Nepean Island on June 26 from the effects of dreadful bites inflicted by a shark while he was diving for trochus-shell.

The grim story of the attack on the lad was related by Constable J. Martin, of the Thursday Island police, in a report received yesterday by Inspector W. Lipp, Superintendent of the Cairns police district.

Constable Martin stated that Willie was brought to Thursday Island on the Nianga, one of the aboriginal industries boats. An examination of the unfortunate boy showed that he had a large hole in the right side and all his intestines were exposed. The hole was about nine inches by nine inches and was oblong shaped and extended from near the centre of the chest to the side of the body almost in line with the arm-pits. The boy's ribs were bitten clean through and pieces of flesh and ribs were missing. There was also a small portion of liver missing. The marks of the shark's teeth could also be seen on the boy's left breast, which was badly lacerated.

The constable, in his report, added that he interviewed the other aboriginals who were on the dinghy with Willie. They were named Cockatoo, Paul and Wally. From what he could gather from them the attack occurred at 1 p.m. on June 26. The party was working on a reef near Nepean Island, about half a mile from where their cutter was anchored. Paul was in the dinghy, but the other two were diving for trochus.

"PUSHED SHARK OFF."

A dramatic story of how Cockatoo evaded the shark's attack was then related by Constable Martin. He said that Cockatoo told him that he

was standing in the water up to his neck when he saw a shark swimming rapidly towards him. He dived and as the shark rushed past he twisted his body and pushed the monster off with both hands.

Constable Martin said that Cockatoo described the shark as being of the tiger variety, about 8ft. long. He said that the shark appeared to be making straight for his body and as it approached it turned on its side and opened its mouth. Cockatoo added that as soon as the shark missed him he dived and went into a hole in the coral and did not see the shark again. He stayed below until his wind gave out and then came to the surface.

LIVED FEW SECONDS.

Cockatoo further related to the constable that as he came up for air he heard Willie call out "O-oh." He (Cockatoo) swam to the dinghy, which was about six yards away. Wally jumped into the dinghy from the other side and the party assisted the stricken boy into the boat. Cockatoo said that Willie only lived a few seconds after he murmured his farewell words.

How the party rowed to the cutter and reported the affair to Captain Ned Stephen was told by Cockatoo to the constable. They then set out for Thursday Island, which was reached about 5.10 p.m. on the same day. Neither Paul nor Wally saw the attack by the shark on Willie, and they were of the opinion that Willie did not see the shark prior to being attacked, as they think he was swimming at the time.

NATIVES' TENDER CARE.

Dr. J. R. Nimmo, the Government medical officer at Thursday Island, enclosed a certificate of death, which gave it as (1) Wounds on the right side of thorax and abdomen; (2) shock from shark bite.

Describing the attack, Wally, in a statement to the police, said that when they pulled Willie into the dinghy Cockatoo sat on the floor of it and placed Willie's head on his lap, while he (Wally) held on to his legs. He heard Willie murmur, "Good-bye to my countrymen. God bless you," and within a few seconds Willie died.

KILLED BY SHARK.

Aboriginal Boy Diver.

COMPANION'S CLEVER ESCAPE.

BRISBANE, Monday.

A 16-year-old aboriginal named Willie, employed at Aurukun Mission in the far north, was killed by a shark while diving for trochus shell on the reef off Nepean Island, near Thursday Island. He received terrible injuries to the chest.

His companion, named Cockatoo, had a narrow escape. He was standing in water up to his neck when he saw the shark swimming rapidly towards him. He dived, and as the shark rushed past, he twisted his body and pushed the monster off with both hands. He then dived into a hole in the coral, where he remained until he could hold his breath no longer. He then rose to the surface, and was assisted into a boat.

The body of Willie was taken to Thursday Island.

The Sydney Morning Herald, Tuesday July 7, 1936, page 6

Shark Toll!

Eleven Taken in Ten Years

THE death as a result of shark bites of a 16 year old aborigine employed at the Aukukun Mission (reported during the week) was the eleventh shark fatality among aborigines in ten years. Ten victims died before admission to hospital, but only one of 19 admitted to hospital succumbed to his injuries.

The total number of attacks for the last 10 years is 29. The survival rate is 64 per cent, compared with a rate of about 20 per cent in a series of attacks on white swimmers.