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ACTIVITY: Swimming

CASE: [GSAF 1959.01.17.b](#)

DATE: Saturday January 17, 1959

LOCATION: The attack took place in Safety Cove, Port Arthur, Tasmania, Australia.
43°8'S, 147°50'E

NAME: Brian John Derry

DESCRIPTION: He was a 22-year-old male, an Electrical Mechanic from *H.M.A.S. Cootamundra* (an Australian corvette), and a strong swimmer.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: It was a hot summer day; by lunchtime the air temperature had soared to 90°F.

SEA CONDITIONS: Sea surface temperatures were five to seven degrees Celsius above normal for that time of year. Some ships in the area recorded surface temperatures of as high as 23°C while Eaglehawk Neck and Cape Bruny registered 10° and 19.5°C respectively.

ENVIRONMENT: In the early afternoon black fins were seen moving parallel to the beach, but it was thought they belonged to dolphins. Mr. Derry had been spearfishing previously but it is not known if he was carrying or towing speared fish when he was attacked.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 300 yards

DISTANCE FROM SHIP: 100 yards

DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE: "Deep water"

TIME: 16h30

NARRATIVE: The sailors were taken ashore for rest and relaxation. Brian Derry decided to swim out to the anchored corvette. Mr. A.L. Briggs, a witness who was watching him with binoculars, said an enormous shark abruptly exploded from the water in a shower of spray, hitting the swimmer with crushing force before dragging him below the surface. in a swirling circular motion. Briggs later said, *“I definitely saw the shark ... it was a big one”*.

Although Derry was 300 metres from shore when he was attacked, the sound of the impact was clearly heard by those on the beach. To some of the beachgoers, the noise suggested that a killer whale/s rather than a shark was responsible.

The shark remained at the surface feeding for some time afterwards and the movements of its dorsal, pectoral and tail fins as it twisted and rolled in the water initially led other witnesses to mistakenly believe that several sharks were involved in the attack. Despite an intensive search, no trace was ever found of the man.

INJURY: Fatal

SPECIES INVOLVED: The press reported the largest shark was 14 feet in length, and witnesses reported seeing sharks 17 feet to 20 feet in length, however, Mr. Briggs, the most reliable witness, stated that the attack involved a single shark.

SOURCES: The Canberra Times, January 19, 1959
The Age, January 20, 1959, page 5
Odessa American, January 19, 1959
Gilbert P. Whitley, ref. Daily Telegraph [Sydney] and West Australian [Perth] January 19, 1959
Newcastle Herald, January 19, 1959
The Mercury, January 19, 20, 21 & 23, 1959
Perry Gilbert, Leonard Schultz & Stewart Springer (1960)
Chris Black (2010) *White Pointer South*, pages 148-150

CASE INVESTIGATORS: R.D. Weeks and Chris Black, Global Shark Accident File

Navy Man Killed By Sharks At Port Arthur

HOBART, Sunday. — A Naval rating from H.M.A.S. Cootamundra was torn to pieces by two sharks while swimming near the ship in Safety Bay, Port Arthur yesterday.

Police, fishermen and naval parties were dragging the bay to-day for the body.

The rating was a member of a recreational party sent to the beach for exercise and swimming.

The rating, a good swimmer, was swimming back to the ship after skin diving in deep water when the attack occurred.

Eye witnesses said two sharks made the attack and one was about 17ft long.

A motor boat was put out from H.M.A.S. Cootamundra with an armed party, and several shots were fired at the sharks.

One of the sharks was shot. It has been many years since a shark attack was reported off Port Arthur.

*The Canberra Times
January 19, 1959, page 1*

Two Sharks Kill Naval Rating

HOBART, Sunday.—A naval rating from the Australian corvette H.M.A.S. Cootamundra was killed by two giant sharks at Safety Cove, Port Arthur, in southern Tasmania yesterday.

He was one of a recreation party landed from the ship for exercise and swimming.

He had been skin diving in deep water and was returning to the ship when the two sharks attacked.

The ship's captain, Lieut. Commander J. A. Nicholas, said that when the rating was about 200yds. from the shore there was a sudden flurry of water and the rating disappeared.

A ship's motor boat rushed to the spot and seamen tried to hit one of the sharks with an anchor. They returned to the shore to get a rifle and fired several shots into the water at the sharks.

17½ FT. LONG

One of the sharks, Lieut. Commander Nicholas said, was longer than the motor boat—17½ ft.

The rating's body has not been recovered. His name

has not been released because police and navy officers have been unable to trace his next-of-kin. His mother is believed to be travelling by car between Sydney and Melbourne.

Shark Attack Victim Named

The Navy Office yesterday released the name of the rating who lost his life on Saturday in a shark attack at Port Arthur, Tasmania.

He was Electrical Mechanic Brian John Derry, 22, of East Melbourne.

Derry's next of kin — his mother—could not be notified of her son's death until she arrived home late yesterday at the end of a motoring trip from Brisbane.

Derry was attacked by a shark while swimming 500 yards from the shore to H.M.A.S. Cootamundra, anchored in Safety Cove.

Danger months open tragically TWO SHARK ATTACKS IN AUSTRALIAN WATERS

Daily News Correspondent

CANBERRA, Monday. THE shark season opened dismally this week-end in Australia when a Naval rating was killed off the Tasmanian coast, and a young lifesaver had his foot badly mauled off the Brisbane coast. January and February are reputed to be Australia's worst month for sharks, which are attracted by the warmer water near the shores.

The rating was a member of a recreational party landed from the destroyer, Cootamundra, which was proceeding to Hobart to act as flagship at the annual regatta.

While other ratings were waiting for a launch to return them to the ship, the man killed decided to swim the 300 yards.

A man on the shore, watching through binoculars, said the rating was halfway to the ship when the water swirled up in a "sort of explosion." Several shark fins criss-crossed the area after the rating disappeared.

Ratings in the launch pumped bullets into the shark which, they said, was at least 17 feet long.

This is the first confirmed shark attack in Tasmanian waters for 100 years. The body of the rating has not been recovered.

FOOT GRABBED

In the other shark incident, an 18-year-old lifesaver, Peter Neil, who weighs 200lb., was grabbed by the foot when swimming 200 yards off shore. He kicked furiously, wrenching his foot away and raced for the shore. Luckily he caught a slide which brought him well inshore.

A doctor inserted 17 stitches in the youth's lacerated heel.

There were other shark alarms yesterday on the new South Wales and Victoria coasts.

SHARK KILLS NAVAL RATING AT PORT ARTHUR

A shark killed a naval rating at Safety Cove, Port Arthur, on Saturday, in the first known shark fatality in Tasmania.

The rating was swimming to his ship, the training vessel *HMAS Cootamundra*, when the shark attacked in a swirl of water and dragged him under. Mr L. G. Briggs, a farmer at Safety Cove, saw the attack through binoculars. He said the rating, whose name has been withheld until his mother is notified, was on the beach with several others who had been swimming and spearfishing.

A launch from the *Cootamundra* took some of them to the ship and the rating decided to swim out instead of waiting for the return trip.

"He was a good swimmer," Mr Briggs said. "A while earlier he had swum out there. He got sick of waiting and asked me: 'Are there any sharks?' I said: 'It has never been heard of here'."

"He asked his cobbers to bring his clothes and goggles aboard, and dived into the water. He was about 300 yards out when the shark got him."

FLURRY IN THE WATER

"There was a loud noise and a flurry in the water - a sort of explosion. We heard the noise from the shore. We had seen fins earlier and thought they were porpoises. They criss-crossed the place where he disappeared."

"I've been here 40 years and shark attacks are unheard of."

Mr Briggs said the party on shore shouted to the ship to send a boat in. "We waved shirts and a launch put off from the ship. Men fired .303 rifles at the shark, and the *Cootamundra's* commander (Lt-Cdr. J. M. Nicholas) said later that one shot had hit the shark before it swam away. He didn't think the shot was fatal."

Mr Briggs said he had his binoculars trained on the rating when the shark attacked. "I definitely saw the shark - it was a big one."

He said the launch searched the area for a while and then came inshore to pick up the other sailors. Then the *Cootamundra* went to Port Arthur township to report the death to the police. Yesterday morning, while fishing boats dragged the bay and set shark lines, Lieut-Cdr. Nicholas held a memorial service on the ship. Many of the 85 men on the *Cootamundra* sent messages to relatives to say they were alright.

Dragging will continue today with Sgt. Roy Langford of the Hobart Water Police in charge, helped by Port Arthur's Constable K. D. Cripps and Constable D. Cooley, from Dunalley. Late last night police and the navy were trying to get in touch with the mother of the rating killed. They believe she is travelling between Brisbane and Melbourne, and want to tell her of her son's death before they release his name.

OTHER BIG ONES SEEN

Two fishermen reported sighting other big sharks yesterday - Mr Max Spaulding shot one, a 10ft blue pointer, at Wedge Bay near Nubeena. He said he was cutting up 'couta when he saw the shark. He killed it with one shot, and dragged it onto the beach.

Mr J. Broughton saw two big sharks while he was setting nets from a dinghy off the Taroona High

School. One of them turned a few feet from the dinghy.

"It was quite a bit longer than the dinghy," Mr Broughton said.

"I saw its belly as it turned. It would be about 18 in. through the girth. The sharks were the biggest I've seen."

Fishermen said last night they thought a run of hot days had warmed the water enough to make sharks savage.

SOURCE The Mercury Newspaper, Monday January 19, 1959, page 1

MISSING RATING'S NAME NOT RELEASED

The Royal Australian Navy has not yet released the name of the naval rating believed to have been killed by a shark at Port Arthur on Saturday.

The naval officer in charge (Commander A.W. Salisbury) who is directing investigations, said yesterday that the mother of the dead seaman had not yet been officially informed of her son's death. Police and naval authorities were still trying last night to locate the mother who is believed to be travelling between Brisbane and Melbourne. Yesterday, two warships - *HMAS Swan* and *HMAS Cootamundra*, with the help of a number of fishing boats, made an unsuccessful ten hour search for what was thought to be a body floating near Tasman Island, 7 miles from where the rating was presumed to have been attacked by the shark. It was seen by the lighthouse keeper at Tasman, floating about 200 yards east of the island, just after sunset on Sunday. He contacted Bruny Island lighthouse by wireless. Bruny, in turn telephoned the navy office in Hobart. *HMAS Swan*, which was berthed in Hobart, and *HMAS Cootamundra* at Port Arthur, were then detailed to search. Both ships searched for ten hours from first light yesterday morning. The rating, who belonged to the *Cootamundra*, disappeared while swimming at Safety Cove. It is believed he died in the first known shark fatality in Tasmania.

SOURCE: The Mercury Newspaper, Tuesday January 20, 1959

SHARK VICTIM IDENTIFIED

The naval rating believed to have been killed by a shark at Safety Cove, Port Arthur last Saturday, was identified yesterday as Brian Derry (22) of East Melbourne. His body still has not been recovered nor has the shark been caught.

SOURCE: The Mercury Newspaper, Wednesday January 21, 1959, page 3

SURE SHARK WAS RATING'S KILLER

A Big Game fisherman with years of experience claimed yesterday there was little doubt that the naval rating Brian Derry (22) was attacked and killed by a shark at Port Arthur on Saturday. He is Mr C.I. Cutler of Lufra Hotel, Eaglehawk Neck, the secretary of the Tasmanian Gamefishing Association. Mr Cutler said he disagreed with the suggestion made by Dr E.R. Guiler, senior lecturer in zoology at the University of Tasmania, that the sailor was probably a victim of an attack by a killer whale. Mr Cutler said there were many factors apart from the accounts of eye

witnesses on *HMAS Cootamundra* and on the shore, to suggest it was a shark that attacked and killed the young rating. "People should not get the idea that sharks would not attack in Tasmanian waters, all sharks are dangerous." He said he was fishing last weekend when the rating was attacked. The temperature of the water was 68 degrees, which was about 5 degrees above normal for this time of year, and getting close to temperatures in Sydney where sharks were taken seriously. The danger of shark attacks rose as the temperature of the water went up. It was well known the many different types of man-eating sharks frequented Tasmanian waters under favourable conditions, and the weather over the last month had been ideal to encourage sharks into waters much further south than usual. Mr Cutler said the description given by people who were on hand when the attack occurred, provided strong evidence that the shark which killed the rating was a blue pointer. He said it was unrealistic to suggest that sharks would not attack people in Tasmanian waters. "I think it is almost beyond doubt it was a shark and people should be on the lookout for other attacks under present conditions," Mr Cutler said.

SOURCE: The Mercury Newspaper, Friday January 23, 1959, page 3



1950s : The 735-tons Bathurst Class minesweeper corvette HMAS Cootamundra at Newcastle, New South Wales when she was a training vessel for Navy reserves and National Servicemen.