

**ACTIVITY:** Hookah Diving

**CASE:** GSAF 1993.11.21

**DATE:** Sunday November 21, 1993

**LOCATION:** The incident took place at a pearl farm in Roebuck Bay, Australia.

**NAME:** Richard Peter Bisley

**DESCRIPTION:** He was a 27-year-old male who had been working as a pearl diver for four years.

#### **BACKGROUND**

**MOON PHASE:** First Quarter, November 21, 1993

**SEA CONDITIONS:** Visibility is generally poor in Roebuck Bay and at the time of the incident it was only 2.5 metres. The incident took place at mean high tide, slack water.

**ENVIRONMENT:** The northwestern Australian coast from the Lacepede Islands north of Broome to Exmouth Gulf are famous for pearl shell of *Pinctada maxima* and the "South Sea" pearls created by these shells are the most valuable in the world. The northwestern Australian coast also has a large population of tiger sharks, In the 1970s hookah diving gear replaced helmet gear in the northwestern Australia pearl industry. Air was pumped down to the divers though twin hoses connected to a surface compressor, and each diver carried a 20-cubic-foot 'pony' bottle, an emergency air supply in the event of a loss of surface-supplied air.

**DEPTH OF WATER:** 14 metres

**TIME:** 15h15

**NARRATIVE:** The 'farm' consisted of rows of captive pearl shell in plastic baskets hanging from wire fences on the seabed. Each shell had a 'nucleus' inserted into its mantle to induce it to grow a pearl. The divers' job is to clean each shell of weed and make certain that it was positioned to take advantage of the tide. Richard Bisley and Stefan John Freney-Mills were conducting maintenance together when the air supply of Freney-Mills suddenly dropped in pressure. He switched to his pony bottle and surfaced. Bisley's hose was free-flowing and when his line was pulled in, his weight belt was still attached but the hose to his demand value mouthpiece had been severed. An immediate search of the pearl farm and the surrounding area was initiated. Police were contacted and within 45 minutes nine dinghies with divers and crew were searching for the missing diver. By 16h10 the company Cessna was airborne, and it was joined at 17h00 by a second aircraft. Next day Bisley's face mask, demand valve and pony bottle with shoulder strap severed were found on the seabed, and the fences lines on which the pearl shell hung were damaged. Farm manager Kau Stainton said that it looked as if a large heavy marine creature had crashed through the panels.

**INJURY:** Fatal.

**SPECIES INVOLVED:** A tiger shark was caught near the pearl farm six days after Bisley disappeared. Clothing and human remains in its gut were determined, on forensic examination, to be those of the missing diver.

**SOURCE:** Hugh Edwards, pages 135-137, et al.

