

ACTIVITY: Tech diving

CASE: GSAF 1996.05.24

DATE: Friday May 24, 1996

LOCATION: The incident took place off Bondi Beach, New South Wales, Australia.

NAME: Patrick Bowring

DESCRIPTION: The diver was a 45-year-old male. He was a well-known Sydney journalist and one of 20 technical divers in Australia. He was wearing a black drysuit with light blue arms and shoulders, buoyancy compensator vest, weight belt, mask, fins, breathing apparatus and four tanks.



Bondi Beach

© 2005, Richard D. Weeks, GSAF

BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: Waxing Crescent, 36% of the Moon was illuminated.

ENVIRONMENT: Bowring was diving on the wreck of the 158-ton steam tug *Koputai* that sank on March 5, 1920.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: Six kilometres

DISTANCE FROM SUPPORT BOAT: 15 metres

DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE: 80 metres

TIME: Morning

NARRATIVE: Patrick Bowring and two other divers descended down a line to the wreck. At the 20 metre mark, Bowring signaled the two divers that he was having difficulty and was returning to the surface and the two divers continued down to the wreck. At the surface, and gave the 'OK' sign to those on the support boat. Then he appeared to be having difficulty with his mask. He was just 15 metres from the stern when heavy swells washed over him and he appeared to have difficulty reaching the safety line. Two people from the boat entered the water to assist him but he disappeared.

When the two divers surfaced without him, the alarm was raised and a full search was started that included police launches and helicopters. His body was not recovered.

INJURY: By 16h00 on the day of Bowring's disappearance searchers concluded that he had drowned or suffered a heart attack.

EQUIPMENT DAMAGE: On May 26, Bowring's drysuit, ripped from neck to abdomen with the zipper still done up, was recovered near the wreck in 80 metres of water. "There was no way he could have got out of the suit himself without taking off his equipment and undoing the zip," said the police. On May 28, a Sydney pathologist confirmed that Bowring's suit had been ripped by a shark, but was unable to determine if Bowring was dead when a shark took his body.

SPECIES INVOLVED: It was thought that either a tiger shark or white shark may have been involved at some point in this incident.

SOURCES: Richard D. Weeks, Global Shark Accident File; Hugh Edwards, pages 9-15

© Global Shark Accident File, 1996. All rights reserved. This report may not be abridged or reproduced in any form without written permission of the Global Shark Accident File.

Coroner urges minister to act on diver's death

The State Coroner, Mr Derrick Hand, has called on the Minister for Sport and Recreation to consider regulating the diving industry following an inquest into the death of the journalist Patrick Bowring.

The 45-year-old husband of The Australian Women's Weekly editorial director, Ms Nene King, lost consciousness during a dive off Bondi Beach on May 24 this year, Mr Hand said yesterday in Glebe Coroner's Court.

Mr Bowring's body has never been found but his torn diving suit was recovered a few days after his disappearance.

Mr Hand said that any shark attack would not have happened until Mr Bowring was already lying on the seabed.

There had been too many diving accidents causing death and injury, Mr Hand said. He asked that a transcript of some of the evidence be sent to the Minister for Sport and Recreation, Ms Harrison, to enable her to decide if the industry should be properly regulated.

The coroner was referring to evidence given by Sergeant John Marshall, of the Water Police, who said technical diving – the form of mixed-gas breathing used by Mr Bowring during the dive – was inherently dangerous and "at the moment, it's basically every man for himself".

Sergeant Marshall said it had to be emphasised strongly that divers were responsible for each other.

The "buddy system" was mandatory for recreational diving but with mixed-gas diving it "goes out the window", he said. He called for a code of practice in this highly sophisticated area.

The coroner said Mr Bowring's death was "just one of those mishaps that do occur".

"Whether he had a heart attack or whether something else happened which caused him to drown, I don't know. It's an accident. An unfortunate accident," he said.

After the finding, outside the court, Ms King said no-one would ever know what had happened to her partner, but she welcomed any move to regulate the technical diving industry. "I would be awfully grateful if they'd be a bit stricter on what these boys are doing," she said. "Maybe it will save some lives, but Patrick has gone now, and nothing can be done about that."

Mr Bowring - her partner for 22 years - had been meticulous about diving safety and procedure, she said. "He lived and breathed it, morning, noon and night. He did every course," she said. "He sat by his computer. He was thorough to the point of being annoying, I suppose, but he knew it was a dangerous sport. I knew it was a dangerous sport. The minute he came up, he always rang me, wherever he was, to say, 'I'm on the surface. You can relax'. I do believe that he either had a heart attack or a cerebral hemorrhage. I don't think it was a diving accident. I just think he got into physical difficulty."

Ms King said she feared for the divers and she feared for those left behind. "I cannot describe the last six months of my life," she said. "Pat's gone but we're left here to think, 'What a waste at 45'. That shouldn't have happened. I just try to get on from day to day now. My heart is broken. I miss him so terribly."

Mr Hand said there were no suspicious circumstances surrounding Mr Bowring's disappearance. A report of a sighting by one witness, who claimed to have seen him at Bondi at 12.45 pm on the day of the dive, was mistaken, he said.

In her statement to the court, Ms King said that the last time she had spoken to her husband, he had said he loved her and apologised for being grumpy. "I know he would not take his own life, as we both spoke about it and if either of us went, we decided we would both go," she said in her statement.

A marine electrician, Mr David Apperley, told the court he had dived into the water to help Mr Bowring, who seemed to be having difficulty, but by then it was too late. Mr Bowring disappeared before Mr Apperley could reach him.

SOURCE: Anabel Dean, The Sydney Morning Herald, October 23, 1996, page 8