

ACTIVITY: Spearfishing

CASE: **GSF 2004.12.11**

DATE: Saturday December 11, 2004

LOCATION: The attack took place at Opal Reef, 70 kilometres northeast of Cairns, Queensland, Australia.

16°30.194'S 147°50.697'E

NAME: Mark Thompson

DESCRIPTION: He was a 38-year-old male from Clifton Beach, 1,74 metres tall and weighed 70 kg. He had 15 years of spearfishing experience. He wore a 'bait pouch' attached to his weight belt.

Thompson had recently returned from a week-long holiday, spearfishing off Lizard Island in north Queensland. His close friend, Les Marsh, owner of charter company Fishing Cairns, said Thompson regularly went spearfishing on the reef. "He was a fabulous guy who lived life to the full."

Thompson was married (wife, Caroline) and had a 10-year-old daughter. He had an upholstery business in Cairns.

SUPPORT BOAT: A private 25-metre game fishing boat



BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: New Moon, December 12, 2004

ENVIRONMENT: Opal Reef is a popular diving and spearfishing spot, with daily visits from commercial dive and snorkeling boats. Queensland boaters and fisheries acting Cairns district manager Robert Hall said while they felt deeply for the Thompson family's loss, they would eventually need to know the exact location of the incident. "Opal Reef itself and areas surrounding Opal Reef are known as the Green Zone, while above the northern part of Opal Reef is a public appreciation area," he said. The green zones are closed to fishing under federal law to protect the Great Barrier Reef and its depleting fish stocks, while spearfishing is restricted in public appreciation zones. Mr. Hall said fisheries inspectors would need to investigate exactly what the group was fishing for. From December 6 to until midnight December 14, recreational and commercial fishers are banned from catching coral reef fin fish to protect them during spawning. "If you're in the water and you see a crayfish or mackerel, or a trevally or a pelagic species you can spear those, but you can't spear a coral trout or a red emperor or any other reef fish," Mr Hall said. (Note: It was later determined that the divers had not been in a restricted area.)

DISTANCE FROM BOAT: 15 metres

TIME: 13h00

NARRATIVE: Mark Thompson had set off from the marina at Yorkeys Knob, just north of Cairns, for a social day of spearfishing. He had been spearfishing with two friends, but they

had returned to the boat for lunch while he continued to spearfish about 60 metres from the bow of the boat. One of his friends looked up and saw Mark vertically upright in the water, then heard him scream. His friends quickly weighed anchor, went directly to him. Thompson was in a pool of blood about three metres in diameter and his spear gun floated nearby, but they did not notice whether it had been fired. They quickly pulled him into the boat. He was still conscious when pulled onboard but was extremely pale. The friends tried to pack the wound to stop the bleeding, and talked to him to keep him calm and prevent him from trying to get up. After efforts to contact Emergency Services by radio failed, they succeeded in reaching them by mobile phone. While returning to land, the Thompson slipped in and out of consciousness and 10 minutes before the emergency helicopter arrived, no pulse could be felt, although his eyes were open. Death was confirmed by the paramedics. The boat was then taken back to Yorkeys Knob while Thompson's body was flown straight to Cairns, 17 kilometres further south.

INJURY: Fatal. Thompson sustained a single large bite down to the bone on his medial left thigh that severed his femoral artery. "It was a very deep and major laceration," said paramedic Leon Oliveri, who was on the rescue helicopter that flew to the boat. Death was due to exsanguination.

SPECIES INVOLVED: No teeth or tooth fragments of the shark were recovered, but tooth marks on the victim and his wetsuit indicated that a 'bull whaler' shark, *Carcharhinus leucas*, or a 'black whaler' shark, *Carcharhinus obscurus*, was involved. Experts from James Cook University thought the shark was 1.8 to 2.2 metres in length.

COMMENT: The victim's friends had not observed any shark in the area prior to the attack. The presence of blood from fish that had previously been speared and the 'bait pouch' worn by the spearfisherman may have drawn the shark to the vicinity.

SOURCES: Chris Evans, The Sunday Age, December 12, 2004, page 1, et al.



Thompson's friends return to Yorkey's Knob, near Cairns, following the attack.