



ACTIVITY: Spearfishing

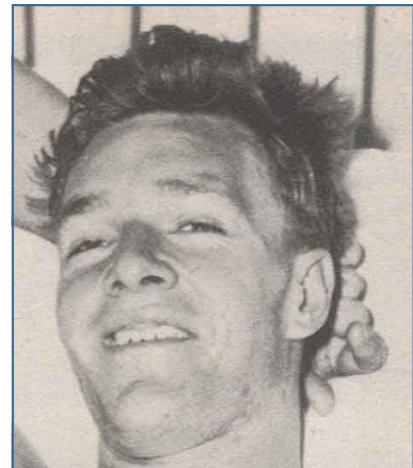
CASE: [GSAF 1961.03.12](#)

DATE: Sunday March 12, 1961

LOCATION: Aldinga Beach, South Australia.
35°15'S, 138°30'E

NAME: Brian Rodger (or Rodgers)

DESCRIPTION: He was a 21-year-old male, President of the Underwater Spearfishing Photographic Association and Chairman of the Underwater Rescue and Recovery Squad of South Australia, and was a delegate to the Council of Underwater Activities of South Australia. He was 6'4½" and weighed 190 pounds. He had a very muscular physique with no excess fat due to continuous training: body-building, weight-lifting, swimming and adherence to proper diet made the diver a tough solid sportsman. He had been spearfishing for six years. He started approaching the peak of his career in 1960 when he won South Australian Open and Pairs Championships and all major spearfishing events of that year. Holder of many South Australian spearfishing records and champion of inter-club competitions. In 1960, he was also winner of Wendts Invitational Tournament, and winner of the 1960 Yorke Peninsula Open Championship. Fourth in all-Australian Championships in 1960/61, and runner-up as best all round diver and spearfisherman in Australia of that year. He free dives easily to 70 feet. He had also been a lung diver (scuba) for six years and was the Champion Lung diver of South Australia in 1960 and 1961. When the incident took place he was wearing a full-length French Champion 3/16" neoprene black wetsuit with



Brian Rodger

hood and boots, a yellow Compensator face mask, and giant size (spearfishing) full heel black swim fins. He was wearing 16 lbs of lead weights on his belt, a bright steel Wendts Sea Diver Underwater watch on his left wrist (which was lost during the incident) and carried a Espadon dive knife (yellow handle and sheath) on his calf. He also carried a 4'5" wooden arbalete 2-rubber speargun of his own construction. He was towing a new type of float towed by a 26-foot length of 5/32" cotton cord. A small canoe-type float. attached to his weightbelt with a quick-release clip arrangement. The float had a small circular hole on the top for fish delivery. There was no known leak of blood, guts, etc, from float. (Normally, Brian used a float which consisted of a six-inch diameter yellow float to which was attached an 18" piece of wire at the end of which was a nine-inch piece of metal which the diver usually pushed through the fishes eyes to thread them. This float, together with the fish and a pair of plastic reef sandals, were swallowed by an unseen shark in one gulp on the week previous to the attack at the exact same place of attack.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The daytime air temperature ranged from 57.2°F to 72.5°F. At 15h00, the sky was sunny with few clouds and there was a slight south easterly air stream over the state. The air temperature was 70°F, humidity was 44%, barometric pressure was 30.10 in.

MOON PHASE: Third Quarter, March 10, 1961

SEA CONDITIONS: The water was "exceptionally cold". The water temperature was estimated to be 65°F. Underwater visibility was about 25 feet.

ENVIRONMENT: Rodger had seen sharks on numerous occasions and was able to identify many different species of sharks. The incident took place during an inter-club challenge; there were at least 25 spearfisherman — all spearing fish — in an area of ½ to ¾ mile.

Brian had not seen any sharks during the previous four hours of the competition. Other club members had sighted a few apparently uninterested bronze whaler sharks. One member from a visiting club saw a very large sharks within seconds of entering the water; he described the shark as similar to that which bit Brian. Another spearfisherman had a similar 10-12 foot shark swimming around him for a while some time after the incident and after Brian had left the water. This shark's description was also very similar to the shark that bit Brian.

DISTANCE FROM SHORE: 3/4 of a mile, and a half mile off the nearest resting point of reef which is out of water at low tide.

DEPTH OF WATER: 30 to 35 feet

TIME: 14h30 or 15h00

NARRATIVE: by Brian Rodger as told to Andris Liduma:

"Having been spearfishing for six years, I have seen sharks on numerous occasions. This in nothing very unusual or outstanding, as nearly every skin diver in South Australia and other Australian states has usually sighted sharks under some circumstances. Sharks are regarded as part of Australian skin diving, their presence adding a degree of fear and excitement. Fortunately skin divers in other countries do not have to contend with this menace, at least, not to the same extent as Australians.

When skin diving we are always on the alert for sharks, but fortunately the more we see of them the smaller becomes our fear of them or their presence. Of course we respect

them to the utmost extent. Sharks are sometimes compared to dogs — usually they go by without showing the slightest interest, yet an odd one like an Alsation, may bark or even attempt to grab a leg.

Fortunately, in South Australia, which is regarded by professional line fishermen as one of the best shark fishing places in the world, with many world records caught here, there had only been three shark attacks in the last 50 years, two of them fatal. All were swimmers, the last one being in 1946.

“Spearfishermen had had their fish taken quite often, sometimes whole fish floats have been swallowed. There have been some attempted attacks but the spearfishermen have avoided these by swimming towards the approaching sharks and yelling underwater. Some sharks have even been speared while coming in very close trying to attack the diver.

“On Sunday, the 12th of March 1961, we were preparing for an annual challenge competition between an Adelaide spearfishing club and my club, the Underwater Sporting and Photographic Association of South Australia. The competition was held on a well-known reef 30 miles from Adelaide: the Aldinga Reef. It started at 10:15 a.m. and was to last for three hours. Twenty-one spearfishermen were competing. The rules were simple: two fish of each species, two points per fish, one point per pound. Team with highest number of points wins.

“As it was a beautiful, cloudless, windless day, with a dodge tide, there was promise of good fishing. Some three hours later I had nearly all of the usual species in my wooden float, which I was towing some distance behind me, containing about 50 pounds of fish. I was at present just over half a mile from the nearest point of land. Suddenly I was startled to see two 50 - 60 pound Yellowtail swim below me in about 25 feet of water. I dived and shot a spear after the fast-disappearing large fish. At this moment it flickered through my mind that after many years, at long last I had seen my first yellowtail and, therefore, maybe from now on, my recent uneventful chain of events which I had been experiencing may change, and I may even see a large shark today, as to that date of the many sharks I had sighted, none had been over nine feet in length.

“As it was getting uncomfortably dirty out there, visibility about 15 feet, I decided to swim towards shore, at an angle towards the weigh-in area. As I came in closer I realized that I was not seeing any fish, even after continuous dives under ledges and into caves. At that stage I became determined that I would still get another species of fish (Herring Kale) in my bag and to do so I would have to swim further out again. The main reason I went out was to push myself a bit more and to try to gain a few more points for my club, which could be the difference between a win or loss in the challenge. Eventually I speared a herring Kale about one pound in weight. About five minutes later I speared a seven pound Dusky Morwong and about seven minutes later my second Herring Kale. All these fish were quickly placed in my waterproof wooden float, even though the Dusky Morwong did put up quite a good struggle.

“It was then that I realized how far out I was from shore and how far I must be from the

nearest diver, as none were within sight. I remember that at this stage a thought flashed through my mind —“what on earth am I doing out so far — just to spear a few Herring Kale?” - and a strange, slightly uneasy feeling went through me — maybe it was a premonition or the fact that I may have then been looked over by my would-be-attacker! I had seen no shark on this day at all.

“The first warning I had of the shark was when my body convulsed with a stifled deep scream as the shark’s teeth sunk into my left leg. At this time I had been swimming on the surface with my eyes searching the bottom for a diving spot and my gun cocked in the pit of my stomach ready for a dive.

“A very instantaneous feeling of panic and startled horror went through me, but was quickly replaced by the greater emotion of self-survival. My body was covered, and to some extent protected, by a 3/16” double skin neoprene suit.

“I quickly swung to my left side and was horrified to see the jaws of a huge White Pointer about 12 feet long clamped over my left leg. It was a freakish, nightmare scene and my immediate reaction was to get my thumb into its eye, but as I lunged my left hand towards it, the jaws must have released the grip on my leg to try for my hip, so that my outstretched hand went down its throat. I did not see or know just how this happened as all I can remember clearly is the sinking feeling in my stomach as I felt the sharp teeth tear at my arm and I quickly pulled it back. How close I came to losing my left hand I will never know. Whether it was the movement of my arm going down its throat, or some other reason, I cannot say, but the White Pointer then let go and swam in a half circle around me about six to eight feet below the surface and about 15 feet from me. As it came in to attack again, I dived about four feet below the surface, swam straight towards the approaching “Great White Death” (native name). A malicious glee went through me as I positioned myself, aimed and fired at its head, hitting it about three inches back from its left eye. The spear penetrated two to three inches deep. On impact, the great White Pointer shook himself as if in pain or trying to rid itself of the spear, which it quickly did and then disappeared at a very fast rate out of sight.

“From then on I hardly worried about the shark at all. I looked at my leg, saw that it was terribly mutilated and blood was just pouring out of it. I turned away, and seeing the nine-inch long tear in my left forearm did not improve my state of mind. I think that at that moment I was expecting to die, but as I started swimming towards shore, I found I could still use both legs and realized that with the aid of a miracle I maybe able to still make it.

“The front of my gun was in a tangle and the spear was bent, so as I began swimming I started to untangle it, so that I could use the rubber for a tourniquet on my leg. From a recent first aid course which I completed as part of the South Australian Underwater Emergency Rescue Squad course, I realized that I had to stop the bleeding, otherwise I would die from loss of blood by the time I had finished my swim of three quarters of a mile to shore. I thought that I might be lucky and have the blood clot and thus stop the bleeding. As this did not seem to be happening, the blood was still flowing freely and I could feel myself getting weaker, after 15 minutes from the time of the attack I applied the tourniquet. I did this by slipping the gun rubber over my left flipper up to the thigh of the

leg. It was difficult to see what I was doing because blood was everywhere, so I had to keep swimming while applying it. Holding the tourniquet tightly I found I could still swim alright. To secure the tourniquet tightly I took my sheath knife, put it through the loop of the rubber and twisted it until I thought it was tight enough. For a while I swam holding the knife so that it could not unspin itself. Then the idea occurred to me to put the knife end under the top part of my neoprene suit. This worked well. I had the use of my hands again and the bleeding soon stopped. Thus I had completed one of the main actions which saved my life. Afterwards I was told that had I applied the tourniquet immediately I most probably would have lost my leg as the circulation would have been cut off for too long a time.

“Then came the real determination. I could not die, I was too young. What would my friends and relatives say? Not being able to finish a race or a great test? I would finish. I would keep going! And I did! I grew weaker and weaker. While struggling onwards I was holding the pressure point under my left arm to arrest the bleeding in my forearm.

“Slowly the shore began to draw closer. I kept thinking, could I make it — would I make it? Every minute I was getting weaker and weaker. At this stage I ditched the float but with much regret, because it was a borrowed float and also because it contained over 50 pounds of fish which could have brought honour to my club. Then I also dropped my trusty gun and ditched my weight belt. Soon it was becoming increasingly harder to breathe through my snorkel. The shore was still a long way off. To keep going I had to concentrate my thoughts on the greater things of life to keep my mind from giving in to the overwhelming feeling that was coming on. Then I could see a few people standing on the edge of the reef. I called out ‘Help. Shark Attack. Help me!’ but all they did was to stare, as if I was putting on some sort of an act. It was exasperating! The shouting sapped up the last of my energy and I rolled over on my back, being supported by the neoprene suit. Periodically, I kept waving with my right arm. I called out a few more times and then things started to go spinning. I was no longer afraid of death. It did not seem that bad now. I had accepted my fate and was waiting to faint. Would I wake up in hospital? I wondered? I did not think so.

“Yet some greater, stronger power seemed to give me yet more strength. I could not give up and I started to swim again, this time on my back. I may have even made it on my own — who knows? Then all of a sudden I saw a surf ski on my left and closer on my right a small rowing boat approaching with two divers. No matter what happened at least I could tell these two divers the detail of the attack to let other skin divers know and beware of the shark. While still in the water, I stammered to them the details of the attack. With my last bit of strength, I helped overcome the problem of getting myself into the small boat. I still do not know how I managed that. As the boat was only nine feet long there was fear of it sinking. One of the young divers showed the greatest courage by jumping overboard into the sea where some 35 minutes earlier a shark attack had occurred. He even got behind the boat and started pushing while the other diver rowed frantically for the edge of the reef. At this stage I lapsed into a state of conscious restfulness. Now I could do no more, all I still had to do was to keep myself from getting unconscious. The reef was reached quickly, where, by now, there were some 10 skin divers. They lifted up the boat and carried it across the 200 yards of sharp coral and reef formation. I will always be thankful to them, as all of them had to do in bare feet!

“When we reached the beach, I was blue with cold. Then I was placed on an improvised stretcher made from an old door, bandaged, given a drink and rugs put around to keep me warm. It was again a great chance of fortune that a nurse was on the spot and a St. John first aid brigade officer arrived within a few minutes. Also the ambulance arrived minutes later and with the wonderful co-operation of the South Australian Police Force who road-blocked every intersection on our route to the Royal Adelaide Hospital, we arrived within a short time at the casualty ward. My gratitude will always be with the wonderful volunteer lady ambulance driver who drove me to the hospital.

“Only minutes elapsed before I was on the operating table, where I spent three hours receiving over 200 stitches and five pints of blood. Altogether I had lost seven pints of blood in my ordeal. The wonderful work done by the Specialists, Dr. Matuszek and Dr. Hyde, in patching me up, is something outstanding. They are men of great medical abilities and all my life I will be thankful to them for giving me complete use of my torn forearm and mauled left leg.

“Two days later I received another two pints of blood in transfusions. After two days my leg was placed in a plaster for 10 days. When the plaster was removed and the bandage taken off my arm, the doctors and , especially were very pleased with the wonderful way the healing had progressed. For five days my leg was out of plaster, then the plaster was put on again for one month. I spent 16 days in hospital and two months at home recuperating. Since the plaster came off on the 28th April 1961, I have been getting stronger and stronger and the worst part, the damaged knee which was badly swollen, is slowly getting back to normal.

“I can truly say in the complete sense of the word, I was indeed very lucky, to all the many circumstances which accompanied my rescue and recovery. Was it luck, or was it meant that I should not die there and then? Who knows?”

INJURY: The diver’s left leg was bitten and he sustained lacerations to his left forearm.

TREATMENT: The diver was treated at Royal Adelaide Hospital by Dr. Matuszek and Dr. Hyde (see attached Medical Report).

SPECIES: The incident involved a 3.7-metre [12'] white shark, *Carcharodon carcharias*.

SOURCES: Brian Rogers, Skin Diver Magazine, September 1961, pages 28, 29, 58 & 59; Victor M. Coppleson (1962), pages 182 & 252; Hugh Edwards, pages 61-63; H. David Baldrige, page 56; John West, ASAF

