

**ACTIVITY:** Free diving for abalone

**CASE:** [GSAF 1990.09.08](#)

**DATE:** Saturday, 8 September 1990

**LOCATION:** The incident took place in the Pacific Ocean off Russian Gulch Beach, near Jenner, Sonoma County, California, USA.

38°28.5'N, 123°10.5'W

**NAME:** Rodney Orr

**DESCRIPTION:** He is a 49-year-old male. He was wearing a full black wetsuit with hood, mask, boots, weight belt, and swim fins.

### BACKGROUND

**WEATHER:** The sky was clear and the air temperature was 11°C. According to the diver, there was a strong, steady wind of at least 20 knots, with some gusts exceeding 30 knots.

**SEA CONDITIONS:** Underwater visibility was three to four metres.

**MOON PHASE:** Waning Gibbous, 85% of the moon was visible.

**ENVIRONMENT:** The ocean floor was rocky, with thinly scattered palm kelp, *Postelsia palmaeformis*, and bull kelp, *Nereocystis luetkeana*, throughout the general dive area. Pinnipeds were seen on several large rocks 200 meters north of Orr's location.

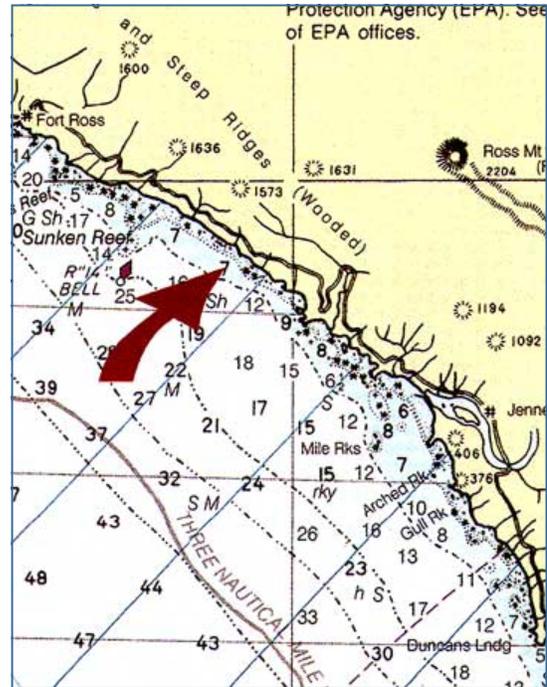
**DISTANCE FROM SHORE:** 200 metres

**DEPTH OF WATER AT INCIDENT SITE:** Six to eight fathoms.

**TIME:** 13h00

**NARRATIVE:** Rodney Orr had been diving for about an hour and had collected four abalone. He was returning to spear fish he had spotted during earlier dives. Orr entered the water off the starboard side of his dive board (used to hold diving equipment) and slowly drifted until he was three meters away from it. He was face-down when the water seemed to explode all around his head. Orr's head and shoulders were lifted from the water and he was pushed across the surface at a rapid rate. His vision cleared just for a moment, allowing him to see water rushing under his head. A single, triangular tooth blocked most of the vision of Orr's right eye, as he realized that his head was in a shark's mouth.

According to Orr, "Within two or three seconds I found myself being 'driven' across the surface toward my board." The shark, with the diver still in its mouth, struck the board and continued for another 10 to 15 metres before releasing its grip. During the attack, Orr continually struck the shark on the side of its head until he was released. Once free of the shark, he watched it slowly descend out of sight.



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**INJURY:** Orr sustained multiple tooth punctures to the face, neck, scalp and upper shoulder.

**FIRST AID:** Orr swam to his board, which was upside down, and pulled himself up onto its exposed bottom. Because the anchor line was fouled, he anxiously slipped off the board and into the water, righted it, retrieved a knife from its sealed compartment, cut the anchor line, and headed for shore. Blood was flowing freely from his head wounds, obstructing his vision. While paddling to shore, he saw the shark off to his left, swimming slowly toward the open sea. It took Orr about 20 minutes to reach the beach. After walking 20 meters up the sand, he yelled to several bathers to summon help. At that same moment, Orr noticed a California Highway Patrol vehicle heading south on State Highway 1, which parallels the beach. He waved his arms, attracting the attention of the patrolmen, who dispatched a Sonoma County Sheriff's Department helicopter. The injured diver was transported to Santa Rosa Community Hospital in Santa Rosa.

**TREATMENT:** Physician Michael Jay was assigned to the hospital's trauma room and attended to the injured diver. His wounds were cleaned and dressed, with several requiring sutures. Orr was administered antibiotics by injection and given a prescription for continuing them for one week. Physicians did not consider his injuries life-threatening, nor was overnight hospitalization necessary. Dr. Jay expected the diver to make a full recovery.

**SPECIES:** The incident involved a white shark, four metres in length.

**NOTE:** This was Orr's second run-in with a white shark; on May 21, 1961 his wetsuit was bitten by a white shark.

Collier writes, "It might be said that Rodney Orr is 'a man of the sea,' for he returned to free diving a mere five days following his attack. As of this writing, Rodney Orr still dives the Central California coast."

**SOURCES:** Daniel Miller and Ralph Collier, Ralph Collier (2003), pages 32-33; Shark Research Committee, [http://www.sharkresearchcommittee.com/unprovoked\\_diver.htm](http://www.sharkresearchcommittee.com/unprovoked_diver.htm)

**CASE INVESTIGATOR:** Ralph Collier

### To be bitten by a shark

Rodney Orr, 63, electrician

I was on my paddle board in the Pacific near Santa Rosa, California. I was getting ready to dive off the side and go spearfishing when the lights went out.

I heard this big, loud noise like a garage door slamming, and it was completely dark. Then all of a sudden I could see these big white things out of my left eye.

At first I thought it was busted fibreglass. I thought maybe a boat ran over me and stuffed my head through my board. But as soon as I touched the white things, I realised that those were teeth.

He had a hold of my head. I was at a right angle to its mouth, hanging out the side. The front teeth were buried in through my cheekbones and my nose. It was quick and sharp.

The teeth were like razors. When he clamped on to me, it was a God-awful crunch. I heard the crunching and the teeth plow through the bone, but it didn't hurt. Something in the brain clicks so you don't feel it till later.

He didn't take me down - he took me out of the water. When I saw the water, it was like one metre below, but I could see we were moving fast. I tried to pull my head out. I reached up on the shark and it was flat, like the side of a Buick, and it had a kind of sandpaper feel.

And then I just started pounding on it. I went berserk. I shredded my gloves on his teeth. I was just striking at him, blind.

I don't know if that's what made him let loose of me. If he would've finished the bite, I would've had no brain.

When the thing let go, it went underneath me, and I saw part of its head. It was a great width; it was wider than my shoulders. He had a hold of me for eight to 12 seconds. We probably traveled about 18 to 21 metres. I swam back to my board. I was bleeding like hell, just blood pouring out of my nose, out of my face. The board was upside down, so I grabbed the side of the board and I flipped it over and it flopped upright. I couldn't feel nothing from the top of my head to the butt on the right side. I had a five-centimetre hole in the back of my neck. I was choking and spitting out all this blood that was running down the back of my throat. And I said, "I gotta get to shore. Now."

They took me away in a helicopter and I got to Santa Rosa hospital. I had like 35 or 40 stitches in the front and probably 25 or 30 in the back. They had no mirrors at the hospital. The only glimpse I caught was a reflection on the helicopter window. I looked like hamburger.

Now, I've got one bad scar near the corner of my eye and across my nose, but hell, they've faded down and fit in the wrinkles.

**SOURCE:** Matt Claus, Bryan Mealer, The Age, December 26, 2003, Section: A3, Page: 2