

ACTIVITY: Sea disaster

CASE: GSAF 2000.11.21.b

DATE: Monday November 21, 2000

LOCATION: The incident took place off in the Great Australian Bight off Ceduna, South Australia.

32°07'S, 133°40'E

NAME: Danny Thorpe

DESCRIPTION: The diver was a 47-year old male.



BACKGROUND

MOON PHASE: Last Quarter, November 19, 2000; New Moon, November 26, 2000.

ENVIRONMENT: Ceduna is a small town in the West Coast region of South Australia. It is located in the northwest corner of the Eyre Peninsula, about 786 km northwest of the capital of Adelaide. Thorpe disappeared in an area inhabited by white sharks, close to where two men were killed by white sharks in September.

NARRATIVE: Around noon on Monday November 20, abalone divers Danny Thorpe and Howard Rodd, 44, were thrown into the water when a freak wave capsized their boat. The two men sat on the boat for hours but wind and waves were taking them farther offshore. Thorpe feared the white sharks in the area and although there was a spare wetsuit in the boat he wouldn't put it on. "He said he'd look like a seal and he wanted to leave his wet weather gear on because it was a fluorescent colour," said Rodd.

Finally, Rodd decided to swim to shore but Thorpe opted to cling to the upturned boat in hopes of rescue. Rodd was also frightened of sharks and he started his swim using the lid of an "esky" (a buoyant food and drink cooler) so as not to attract their attention. He survived the 14 kilometre (eight mile) swim. He swam all night and 12 hours after leaving the boat he spotted a small headland and headed for it. As he swam, a black fin surfaced next to him. "I thought that was the end of everything, I thought I was dead," he said. "Then I heard it breathe and I knew it was a dolphin." A full 24 hours after the boat capsized, (about noon on Tuesday), he came ashore on an isolated part of the South Australian coast. For another full day he stumbled around in mangrove swamps and on unused dirt roads looking for food. Then he was found by passing motorists and taken to a hospital.

In the week that followed, about 50 pieces of wreckage of the boat washed ashore including torn remnants of clothing and equipment that suggested Thorpe may have been killed by a shark. Some of the items (a life vest and lunchbox) were sent for forensic analysis in hopes of determining if the damage was caused by floating debris, rocks or sharks. Dr Jane Taylor, the Forensic Odontologist, disclosed that a number of items which were found by the searchers had scratches and bite marks on them consistent with having been inflicted by a white shark. In particular, scratches on the lid of the clear plastic food container and the wire which connected the life jacket to a light displayed such markings, and there were less conclusive marks on the grey fish bin and another piece of a plastic box. The life jacket worn by Mr Thorpe sustained damage to the extent that the outer covering

had been shredded, and the inner flotation pillow had become separated, but it was not possible to identify the mechanism by which this damage occurred, nor was it possible to determine whether Mr Thorpe was still wearing the life jacket when this damage was incurred.

SOURCES: Penelope Debelle, The Age, November 25, 2000, page 1; Ninemsn. Monday November 27, 2000; An Inquest taken on behalf of our Sovereign Lady the Queen at Ceduna in the State of South Australia, on the 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st days of February 2002 and the 1st day of July 2002, before Wayne Cromwell Chivell, a Coroner for the said State, concerning the death of Danny Thorpe.

CASE INVESTIGATORS: Terry Peake and Bob Myatt, Global Shark Accident File