

ACTIVITY: Helmet diving
CASE: **GSAF ND.0104**
DATE: 1950s
LOCATION: Torres Strait

NAME: Unknown

DESCRIPTION: He was a helmet diver.

NARRATIVE: Former Torres Strait pearl diver Arthur Seekee related the story of another diver who was bitten on the helmet by a tiger shark and escaped by dropping his trousers. "He was spearing fish and attaching them to a string tied to his belt when a large shark turned up," he said. "It tried to get the fish and bit him on the helmet, so the diver took off his trousers and the trousers floated away carrying the fish and the shark followed

SPECIES: The incident involved a tiger shark.

NOTE: Arthur Seekee worked as a pearl diver for four years which included a stint with CSIRO, monitoring pearl beds and the activities of Japanese pearling fleets. In July 1995, when Seekee was 62-years-old he was interviewed by Rory Callinan of the Courier Mail. At that time he owned a hotel on Horn Island. During the interview Seekee said the experience of walking along the sea floor wearing a heavy claustrophobic helmet and relying on air pumped from the surface was both terrifying and exhilarating. "It was very frightening when I did my first dive. All I could hear was the hissing of air in my ears and everything was black as I was lowered to the bottom," he said. "It was only on the bottom that it lightened up a bit to see. But once I was there it was magnificent — it was like an undersea garden. To get over the top of large coral formations you would just put your arms in tight to the chest and trap air through the suit and you would rise up and flat over the coral." The scenery was spectacular and the pay for divers great, but the occupations was fraught with danger. Seekee said there were many deaths from the bends, caused by the effects of nitrogen gas bubbles in the blood and body tissues. "That's why I gave up," he explained. "I had the bends twice. One time I felt my leg going numb and when they brought me up, I just fell on the deck totally paralyzed. They had to send me back down again until it wore off. I was down there for four hours and it was dark by the time I came up. There are hundreds of divers buried in the cemetery on Thursday Island who died from it."

SOURCE: Rory Callinan, Courier-Mail, Thursday 27 July 1995, page 7

DIVER RELIVES SHARK ATTACK TERROR

By Rory Callinan

Diver relives those pearler days

By RORY CALLINAN JA DIVER dropping his trousers to escape a shark attack is one of Arthur Seekee's more unusual memories of being a pearl diver.

The 62-year-old Torres Strait resident is one of a dying breed of undersea daredevils who once risked their lives to harvest pearl shell in the region's treacherous seas during the 1950s.

The wiry hotel owner has kept a small shrine to his diving days at his premises on Horn Island about 25km north-west of the tip of Cape York.

He said the experience of walking along the sea floor wearing a heavy claustrophobic helmet and relying on air pumped from the surface was both terrifying and exhilarating.

"It was very frightening when I did my first dive. All I could hear was the hissing of air in my ears and everything was black as I was lowered to the bottom," he said. "It was only on the bottom that it lightened up a bit to see. But once I was there it was magnificent _ it was like an undersea garden.

"To get over the top of large coral formations you would just put your arms in tight to the chest and trap air coming through the suit and you would rise up and float over the coral."

The scenery was spectacular and the pay for divers great, but the occupation was fraught with danger.

Mr Seekee said there were many deaths from the bends caused by the effects of nitrogen gas bubbles in the blood and body tissues. It comes on if a diver surfaces too quickly.

"That's why I gave up. I had the bends twice. One time I felt my leg going numb and when they brought me up, I just fell on the deck totally paralysed," said Mr Seekee.

"They had to send me back down again until it wore off. I was down there for four hours and it was dark by the time I came up.

"There are hundreds of divers buried in the cemetery on Thursday Island who died from it."

Sharks posed more problems. Mr Seekee said one diver was bitten on the helmet by a tiger shark and escaped by dropping his trousers.

"He was spearing fish and attaching them to a string tied to his belt when this big shark turned up," he said.

"It tried to get the fish and bit him on the helmet, so the diver took off his trousers and the trousers floated away carrying the fish and the shark followed."

Mr Seekee said he worked as a pearl diver for four years which included a stint with CSIRO, monitoring pearl beds and the activities of Japanese pearling fleets.

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