

# **The Shark Arm Murder – an unsolved crime**

On 17 April 1935, a four-metre tiger shark was caught and taken to the Coogee Aquarium where fish were on display to the public. Then on Anzac Day, the shark disgorged the contents of its stomach, including a human arm with a tattoo of sparring boxers, later used to identify the victim as underworld figure, James Smith.

Smith was last seen on 8 April at the Hotel Cecil in Cronulla with Patrick Brady, who was staying at Taloombi Street, Cronulla. Brady had since left the address without notifying the landlord, and a trunk was missing.

During police investigations, Reginald Holmes, another suspect, claimed that Brady had dismembered the body and placed it in the trunk, throwing it into Gunnamatta Bay. He alleged that Brady had presented him with the arm and demanded £500 for the killing. Holmes paid up before throwing the arm into the water at Maroubra.

Brady was charged with Smith's murder. Holmes was due to give evidence against Brady, but was found dead in his car hours before the inquest into Smith's death was to begin on 12 June.

Brady was not convicted for the murder due to the lack of evidence.

## **The shark arm murder – an unsolved crime**

On 17 April 1935, as a fisherman caught a small shark off Coogee Beach, a four-metre tiger shark then swallowed the smaller one, allowing both to be caught. The fisherman took the catch to the nearby Coogee Aquarium Baths to add to the attraction of fish on public display.

Three young men had just been taken by sharks on Sydney beaches in the previous two months and sharks were regarded as a menace. Bounty hunters were employed to catch them and help rid our beaches of sharks.

On Anzac day the following week, the shark appeared ill, then as spectators watched the shark vomited up a human arm. At first it was thought there had been another tragic accident, but when an examination of the arm revealed it had been removed from its body by a sharp instrument, not the jaws of a shark, it was investigated as a murder. Despite being in the shark's stomach full of highly acidic gastric juices for up to 18 days, the arm was so well preserved that a tattoo of two boxers preparing for a fight was clearly seen on the forearm.

An Edwin Smith, after reading the newspaper report, contacted police saying the arm could have belonged to his brother James, who had been missing for several weeks. Some fingerprints were able to be taken, and the identification of James Smith was confirmed. He was a bankrupt builder and small-time criminal who had become involved in illegal gambling, rife in Sydney at the time.

### **The investigation**

James Smith had last been seen drinking with his friend, Patrick Brady, an expert forger, in the Cecil Hotel at Cronulla. They returned to Brady's rented cottage, *Coredjoy*, at 51 Taloombi Street on Gunnamatta Bay. The next morning, according to a taxi driver, Brady hailed a cab in Cronulla and asked to be taken to the home of a seemingly respectable businessman, Reginald Lloyd Holmes at North Sydney. Holmes ran a successful boatbuilding business on McMahon's Point, Lavender Bay, but he also ran a lucrative smuggling ring, using his speedboats to pick up contraband such as cocaine and cigarettes thrown overboard from ships passing off Sydney Heads. James Smith had worked for him until they fell out over a failed insurance scam, and it was speculated that Smith was blackmailing Holmes. Though circumstantial, a link was seen between the murder of Smith and Brady's taxi ride to Holmes. A confession was needed. Police arrested Brady and brought in Holmes who denied knowing Brady.

Then on 20 May, Holmes went out into the harbour in a speedboat and tried to shoot himself. His suicide failed, and as he fell into the water, a rope caught around his wrist stopping him from drowning. He came to and crawled back on the boat. The water police were alerted and chased Holmes down Sydney Harbour for four hours. He gave up just outside the Sydney Heads.

Holmes was taken into custody and agreed to be a witness against Brady. He told Detective Sergeant Frank Matthews that Brady had killed Smith, dismembered his body and stowed it into a trunk that he had then thrown into Gunnamatta Bay (the trunk was never found). He then claimed Brady had come to his home, showed him the severed arm and threatened Holmes with murder if he did not receive £500 immediately. Holmes also admitted that after Brady had left his home, he travelled to the Sydney coastal suburb of Maroubra and discarded Smith's arm in the surf. Police charged Brady with the murder of James Smith.

However, at 1.20am on 12 June, just hours before the start of the inquest into Smith's death, Holmes' body was found in his car in Hickson Road, Dawes Point. He had been shot three times.

At the inquest Brady's lawyer, Clive Evatt, suggested that a 'severed arm does not constitute a body', and that Smith could still be alive, minus his arm. With no witness and a lack of evidence, Brady's trial was over in two days and he was acquitted of murder. Brady died in 1965 at the age of 76, still protesting his innocence. The case remains unsolved.

It has been speculated that both Holmes and Smith could have been victims of gangland style killings. There was open gang warfare Kings Cross and East Sydney in the 1930s. Holmes was deeply involved in the lucrative but dangerous cocaine trade and Smith was a police informer, whose information had led to two gangland members being caught in the act of raiding a bank. It was a rule amongst the underclass that you don't squeal to the cops!

#### References:

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shark\\_Arm\\_case](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shark_Arm_case)
- Alex Castles, *The Shark Arm Murders*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, SA c.1995
- Vince Kelly, *The Shark Arm Case*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1975