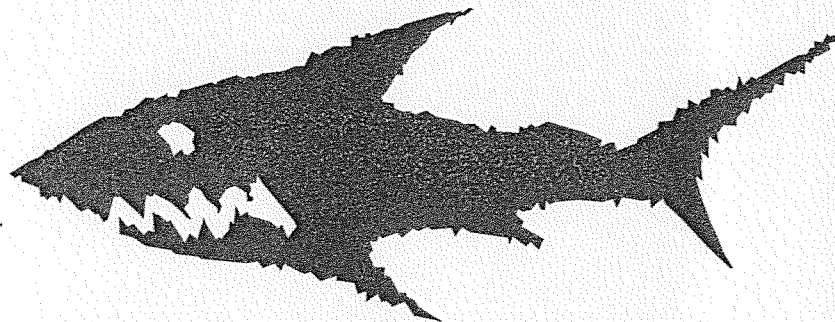


# Shark Bait



BY COLIN THIELE

When Fitzie's father went overboard among the sharks nobody else was even aware of it. At one minute he was battling there in the chair with his harness on and his rod bent like a bow, and at the next minute he was gone. Evaporated. Chair, harness, rod, everything.

Peppy was at the wheel, momentarily looking forward instead of back, and Fitzie himself was in the lee of the wheelhouse sorting out gaffs. It wasn't until he looked up and noticed that the hatch cover had swung forward that he knew something was wrong.

'Hey,' he yelled above the surge of the sea. 'Where's Dad?' Peppy glanced back quickly. 'Christo!'

Fitzie sprang up and ran to the starboard side. He looked about desperately, searching for signs. It was then that he noticed the

blood—red swirls of it boiling up yeastily in the thresh of the props like raspberry juice.

'Oh my God,' Fitzie cried. 'A shark's got Dad.'

Fitzie was fourteen, and on the way to becoming a big game fisherman himself. It was less than a month since he'd caught a 200-kilogram bronze whaler, even though it had taken him two hours to land it. And it had almost torn his arms out of their sockets in the process.

That was why this trip was important. He was going to try for a Great White—something like 500 kilograms—that would put his name in the junior record books of the world. The official entry would look good: *Anthony Fitzgerald, Port Lincoln, white pointer 500 kilograms, caught of Dangerous Reef using Penn reel and 50-kilogram line. Gold Shark award.*

His father was chasing something special too—an all-tackle world record, if he could find a shark big enough. So they'd set out with high hopes just twenty-four hours earlier. But out at sea twenty-four hours can be a whole lifetime—or a death time.

'We'll anchor under Thistle Island,' Peppy said. 'It's a calm night. And we'll head straight for the reef in the morning.'

Peppy was Peppino Caprioli. He owned *Corfu*, a tight 10-metre boat with twin propellers. She had been modified for big game fishing—the hatch cover folding back and latching down with barrel bolts to take the chair. Mr Fitzgerald liked hiring her. Peppy was a good skipper and his rates were cheap. And if anyone knew where the Great White sharks were, Peppy did.

Fitzie liked sleeping on board. He lay on his stomach, his knees chocked against the sides of the bunk as the boat rolled, listening to the suck of the sea against the hull.

Every few hours through the night he was aware of someone pad-padding from the cabin and climbing the ladder to the deck. It was Peppy, going up to check the weather and the riding lights and the anchor, like a good careful skipper.

At two or three o'clock in the morning there was a sudden thump against the boat, followed by a slow scraping sound like someone dragging a piece of sandpaper along the side of the hull.

'Shark,' Fitzie said to himself. 'Shark, rubbing off his barnacles.' It wasn't a comforting thought, considering that the shark's hide was chafing off the paint on the other side of the hull within a few centimetres of Fitzie's left ear. He lay in his bunk, tense and alert, waiting for more movements, but now everything was still.

He was just dozing off again when suddenly there was a horrible grinding noise from the stern and the whole boat heaved and plunged. A new chum would have thought they'd been struck by a tidal wave.

Peppy leapt up as if someone had upended a bucket of ice on his bunk. 'Big fellow,' he yelled. 'And he's got the prop in his jaws.'

He rushed up on deck waving a flashlight. Fitzie and his father stumbled after him in the darkness.

'There he is.' Peppy held the light on the white shape of the great shark.

'Cop the size of him,' said Fitzie's father. 'He's nearly as long as the boat.'

The shark swam slowly through the patch of light and then circled away into the gloom. There was something cold and deliberate about his movements as if he knew that he ruled the sea and that their boat was really as flimsy as a petal.

'See you in the morning,' called Fitzie's father. 'Hope you're still around at daybreak.'

'You'd swear he knew exactly what he was doing,' Fitzie said, 'the way he took that prop in his mouth.'

Peppy laughed. 'They do it all the time—bite the prop, tear chunks out of the transom, rattle the chain like a dog with a bone.'

'I'll give him something to rattle,' said Fitzie's father sourly, 'if I get him on the end of my line.'

'Better not crow,' Peppy warned, 'or he might rattle you.'

But in the morning the big shark had gone. Mr Fitzgerald was disappointed, and so was Fizzie, but Peppy jollied them along.

'He'll be back,' he shouted from the wheelhouse. 'And even if he isn't, there are plenty more like him out at the reef.'

They pushed off at first light, laying a long lure path with the whale-oil drip. There was something about whale oil that no shark could resist. It dripped fast or slow from the can at the stern according to the way the tap was regulated, and as soon as the drops hit the water they spread out, forming a long lane like a flare path. No shark swimming across it would fail to turn and follow it up to the boat.

As they approached the reef they hung out the lures—huge slabs of tuna and stingray suspended from a crossbar across the stern. The sharks came quickly, too quickly. Within minutes there were five or six of them milling about the boat, rearing up and tearing at the lures. Fizzie suddenly found himself looking down the throat of a huge white pointer, its terrible teeth gleaming like triangular white knives in its cavernous mouth. He felt certain that it could have bitten a horse in half without effort.

'He's back, Dad,' he yelled. 'The big fellow's back.'

They weren't really ready for it. His father flung down the hatch and grabbed the chair. 'My harness,' he yelled. 'Quick.'

There was too much haste and confusion, everyone rushing about, fearful that the big shark would tear off a whole lure and retreat into deep water. And, as always in a moment of haste, they made one fatal mistake. The hatch cover was not bolted down before Fizzie's father took his place in the chair.

The big shark took the bait at once. For a second he lolled there malevolently, unaware that he'd been hooked. Four or five others circled and darted about, stirred up by the whale oil and the lures. But then the big fellow felt the pull of the hook and the drag of the steel trace across his jaws, and he ran. The line whipped off the reel like a flywheel belt—100 metres, 200, 300, 400, 'Back up,' Fizzie's father yelled to Peppy. 'I've only got 800 metres of line.'

Peppy was already doing it. He put the engine into reverse and moved backwards in the direction of the shark to gain some slack so that Fitzie's father could wind some line back on to the reel. And so the battle began: run, check, back up and wind in the slack; run, check, back up and wind in the slack—always following the shark as it ran, hour after hour, kilometre after kilometre, across the sea.

How long did it take for a 5-metre white pointer, with a girth like a giant redgum, to begin to tire? There were a hundred things to watch. Peppy had to vary his reversing speed constantly lest he overrun the line and chew it up in the trace because if once he reached the line he would snap it off like cotton thread. The other sharks had to be avoided at all costs because their rasping hides could saw through the line in a second. Every change of direction by the shark had to be matched on the boat, and every centimetre of hard-won slack had to be wound up instantly.

After three hours Fitzie's father said his shoulders felt like pulp. Perspiration poured down his face and dripped off his chin. He was lying far back in the chair, his harness taut and his rod as bowed as a banana. The other sharks had all disappeared. It was a single-handed battle between one man and a white pointer.

'We're gaining on him,' he called to Fitzie. 'Check the gaffs; see that everything's ready.'

Peppy was sceptical. 'Long way to go yet.'

'I'll put more brake on the reel,' Fitzie's father shouted, 'and give him a bit more to pull.'

Peppy turned his eyes towards the instrument panel at that moment, to check the fuel gauge. Fitzie was sorting out the gaffs in the lee of the wheelhouse. And when he looked up, his father had gone.

It was the added pressure on the reel that had caused it. Because the batch cover with the chair on it hadn't been bolted down it was free to swing forward if anything pulled on it hard enough. The extra brake was just enough to tip the scales.

Without warning the hatch cover suddenly swung over like a hinged door, and in the blink of an eye Fitzie's father was catapulted over the stern into the sea—harness, rod, reel and all. It was unbelievable, yet so devastatingly simple—two bolts, a hinge and a moment's carelessness. The consequences were shattering.

Nobody ever knew what the next sixty seconds meant in the life of Fitzie's father. Perhaps it was lucky that he hadn't struck his head on anything as he was flung forward. At least he was still conscious. But he was tied to a great shark, shackled firmly by the harness, and already sinking into deep water. Holding his breath grimly he grappled with the buckles. The line was still running off the reel, but he knew that as soon as it had all gone the shark would start towing him away like an undersea drogue, and that would be the end.

He had no idea how long he was down there, wrestling desperately with the harness, slowly sinking deeper and deeper. His ears were ringing and he could feel the pressure building. He knew he couldn't hold his breath much longer. And then, thank God, he got clear at last and flung away all the clobber—harness, rod, reel and line. He knew that he was throwing away a thousand dollars, but money didn't mean much when you were deep under water with a 2-tonne shark.

He rose quickly. His lungs were bursting and he felt dizzy. But desperate as he was he kept his head. He had his eyes open and he was well aware that the boat was somewhere overhead. The water was stirred up by the thresh of the props and he had to be careful that the boat didn't come back right on top of him. As he shot up towards the surface he began to make out the shape of the hull. He put up his hand to fend himself away, but in his turmoil and haste his misjudged the distance. The boat suddenly seemed to swing towards him and in the next instant the starboard blades caught his left arm.

If he had been a few centimetres closer they would have struck his head and he would have been killed instantly. As it was he hardly felt anything at all—just a *zing* on his arm like a circular saw nicking a bit of wood, or a lawnmower accidentally touching a hidden peg in the grass.

He surfaced, blinking and gasping. The boat was almost alongside. Fitzie and Peppy were leaning over the rail, pointing at him and shouting something. For a second he didn't know what was going on, but then he looked down and saw his arm. From wrist to shoulder there were flaps of flesh hanging from it grotesquely like the weird fronds of a jellyfish, and blood was pouring into the sea. Yet he felt little pain. He looked about, astonished to find himself bobbing like a dummy in a big red bloodstain.

Fitzie threw a rope. 'Dad,' he yelled. 'Grab this. Quick.' It was then that his father really noticed his arm for the first time. It was without strength, worse than useless. He floundered for a second before seizing the rope with his right hand. 'Can't pull myself up,' he gasped.

'Hang on,' Fitzie yelled.

Peppy had cut the motor and the boat was rolling silently in the swell. 'We've got to get him out of there,' he shouted to Fitzie. 'With all that blood the sharks'll go crazy. They'll be here in droves.'

'He can't pull himself up,' Fitzie said. 'He's badly hurt.' Fitzie was in an agony. It was a time for split-second decisions. He grabbed another rope and pushed one end of it into Peppy's hands. 'Here, hang onto this.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Beat the sharks.'

Fitzie took the other end of the rope, swung his legs over the rail, and jumped. He landed with a tremendous splash that almost sank his father. It took a second or two for him to surface and get his bearings. Then he floundered over to his father and tried to pass the second rope around his body, under the armpits.

'Hold on, Dad.'

It was unbelievably difficult. The rolling of the swell, the tug of the boat and the movement of their bodies made them collide and separate, rise and sink, gasp and splutter. By the time he had managed to get the rope tied around his father he felt that he had swallowed half the ocean.

'Let the first rope go,' he gasped at his father, 'and grab this one with your good hand.' He looked up at Peppy. 'Okay. Pull. Pull like mad.'

It was a fearful lift for one man. Peppy heaved until his muscles cracked. It seemed hopeless. At the same time Fitzie glimpsed something out of the corner of his eye and froze. It was a long dim shape moving very fast past the bow of the boat. The first of the sharks had arrived.

'Pull,' he yelled frantically, trying to help by pushing feebly from below.

Peppy heaved again. Luckily this time Fitzie's father was just able to clutch the edge of the deck with his right hand and hang there for a second while Peppy got a new grip in the loop of rope under his armpits. Then, with a stupendous pull, a push from Fitzie, and a lot of scrabbling from his father Peppy managed to get him up under the rail and rolled him onto the deck.

As he did so a second shark flashed past the bow of the boat and circled at high speed on the starboard side. Peppy turned and yelled at Fitzie. 'They're coming. Quick.'

Fitzie was caught between panic and the need for self-control. His feelings urged him to thresh and scramble wildly, trying to hurl himself back on board as fast as he could; his knowledge and common sense told him to move quietly and carefully. Nothing attracted a shark more surely than a lot of turmoil in the water, a flailing and floundering that suggested helplessness. It was almost as if a sense of fear could be transmitted through the water. It turned a swimmer into a victim. It brought the shark in to investigate, and incited him to make his attacking run with those great tearing teeth.

Yet how could anyone move slowly and calmly in a pool of blood surrounded by a gathering circle of white pointers? It would have needed nerves of steel. At the back of Fitzie's mind a voice seemed to keep saying: 'At any minute one of your legs will be torn off.'

Somehow he managed to get to the stern of the boat without floundering about too much. There, with the help of the first rope



that was still trailing overboard, he grabbed the transom.

'Quick,' he gasped.

Peppy rushed forward and seized his wrists. 'Up,' he yelled, as much to himself as to Fitzie.

The pull brought Fitzie's left knee over the transom, and with a frantic thrust he was able to push himself forward on his stomach onto the deck. He lay there for a second, panting.

'I'm afraid to look back,' he said to Peppy. 'Have I still got both my legs?'

'Look over the side,' Peppy answered. 'You had two seconds to spare.'

Fitzie sat up. 'Jeepers,' he said. Five white pointers were milling about just beyond the spot where he and his father had been floundering.

'They're on to the blood,' Peppy said. 'You wouldn't want to be in there with them now.'

The mention of the blood brought them both back to Fitzie's father. He was sitting propped against the base of the wheelhouse, white-faced but still conscious. He had torn off the remnants of his left sleeve and was methodically laying back the torn strips of flesh into the jagged wounds in his arm. Blood was still flowing off his elbow and wrist into a widening pool on the deck.

'Might need a tourniquet,' he said weakly. 'Tony, nip down below and bring up a sheet and a pillow case.'

'We've got to get you to a doctor,' Peppy said. 'And fast.'

Fitzie's father nodded. 'Radio Lincoln. See if they can have one standing by. Tell 'em we can dock in an hour.'

'Less,' said Peppy, 'if I push her.'

Peppy pushed her. Down below, Fitzie suddenly felt the bow lift like a destroyer as both propellers went onto full power. Peppy always boasted that she could travel at 30 knots if she had to, and today he was going to prove it. At the same time he radioed ahead. Fitzie heard the call as he came rushing up on deck with the bandages.

'*Corfu* to VH5BA. *Corfu* to VH5BA. Emergency.'

Fitzie's father now became Dr Fitzgerald. He told Fitzie to cut the pillow case into strips, and then the two of them wound them tightly all the way up the injured arm from wrist to shoulder. They followed this with two or three broad bandages cut from the sheet. The cloth tended to get soggy and spongy at first, but as the blood started to clot, the flow dwindled.

'We'll make it yet,' Fitzie's father said faintly. 'Thank God the bones in the arm are okay. But I'm not so sure about the tendons and muscles.' He lolled back. 'Feel a bit dizzy—shock, I guess, and loss of blood. Hope I don't pass out on you.'

Fitzie covered him with a couple of blankets. 'You'll be right, Dad,' he said. 'Take more than a sprat like that.'

Meanwhile Peppy handled *Corfu* like a speedway driver. As they roared up past Cape Donnington into the South Entrance a police launch came surging across the harbour to meet them. It had a doctor on board. The two vessels slowed down and came alongside momentarily while he leaped across on to *Corfu's* deck. Then Peppy thundered on at full power.

The doctor was impressed with what they had done.

'You'll save the arm,' he said after a while. 'We'll do a quick patch up here, and then lift you over to Adelaide by helicopter. You'll need micro-surgery.'

An ambulance was waiting at the jetty. There was a brief hubbub with ambulance men and onlookers pressing and jostling, and then Fitzie's father was whisked away. After the crisis and tension of the past few hours Fitzie felt a sudden sense of anticlimax.

Just then a reporter came hurrying up to him. He was carrying a note pad and pencil.

'I heard your father telling the others that you saved his life,' he said; 'that you jumped in among the sharks.'

Fitzie was embarrassed. 'Well, not exactly.'

'But you did jump in? You actually made shark bait of yourself?'

Fitzie laughed wryly. 'You're always shark bait out there—once you're in the water.'

'By Jove that was a brave thing to do. You must have nerves of iron.'

'Actually I was scared stiff,' Fitzie answered.

'You couldn't have been—or you wouldn't have done it.'

Fitzie shook his head. 'You do things in the heat of the moment. You don't think about it. Anyone can be brave in action.'

'That's a good line,' said the reporter, writing it down. 'So when your father was in there it needed action—fast action?'

'It sure did.'

'But you reckon it would have been different in cold blood?'

Fitzie laughed. 'If you asked me to jump into a tank full of sharks I'd wet myself.'

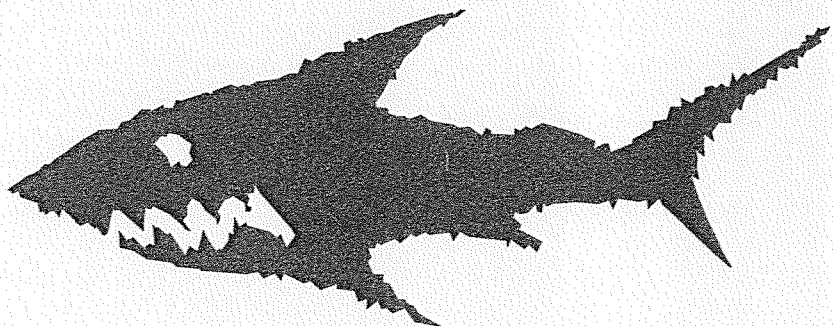
'But if you had to rescue someone from the tank you'd do it—because it would be in warm blood, so to speak?'

Fitzie considered the point. 'I s'pose. But sometimes even warm blood isn't so hot.'

The reporter was delighted. 'That's another good line. I'll make a real story out of this.'

Fitzie was getting annoyed and started to walk away. 'You don't have to make up a story,' he said bluntly. 'Just tell the truth.'

But the reporter did make up a story. And that was how Tony Fitzgerald came to be a kind of legend in his own time.



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