

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Stephen Simpson and Senior Constable David Upston on Tuesday, the 20th of the 4th, 1999 at Heli-Med Air Wing Headquarters at Traralgon Victoria. The time on my watch is now 1.35pm and also present seated directly to my left is Senior Constable Stewart Gray from the Bega Detectives and, Stephen, as I explained to you earlier that Detective Senior Constable Gray and myself are making inquiries for the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race and speaking to people either directly or indirectly involved in the race and we understand that it was your position that you were a crew member on the Heli-Med air craft, rotary wing aircraft at the time of the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race Search and Rescue coordination was being undertaken. For the purpose of the interview could you please state your full name?

A Stephen Simpson.

Q2 And your date of birth?

A Is the 12th of November, 1970.

Q3 And the, your address?

A Is unit 2 number 27 Truth Street, Sale, Victoria.

Q4 And your occupation?

A Air crewman with Lloyd Helicopters.

Q5 O.K. Stephen, could you first of all tell me how long you've been employed with Lloyd Helicopters?

A Since approximately September last year.

Q6 O.K. And your experience as a crew member on, on rescue helicopters?

A Well, I spent 8 years in the military on Blackhawkes as well, so, it's pretty vast, I would guess.

Q7 My word. O.K. What we'll do if you'd like is I'll take you to the 28th, I believe, was when you first become involved - - -

A That's right.

Q7 - - in this search and rescue operation - - -

A Yeah.

Q7 - - in the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race?

A That's right.

Q8 All right. Well, what can you tell me about that?

A Well, I, I first got the call and it was about 11.30 on the 27th, I think it was. I was at home and I was due to work the next day anyway, but I expected a phone call, I saw the weather and you know, trees had been blowing around around my place so, I expected something was going to go on. Got the phone call, was no surprise, was told to be in at work round about 1.30, 2 o'clock the next morning. Came into work, prepared the aircraft, made a few minor repairs, you know, a few things that had happened on the, the rescue before, departed and flew to Mallacoota, refuelled and proceeded out on the first rescue.

Q9 O.K. So you were involved in the, in the first sortie?

A Not the stand aside rescue but the next day when we got the guys off the Solo Globe Challenger.

Q10 O.K. So and, and what was your position actually in the aircraft?

A I was winch operator.

Q11 Oh, right. So what can you tell me happened after you left, left the base at Mallacoota?

A Once we left the base we were given a general brief to go and search. There'd been reports of a beacon going off so we set the course up on the G.P.S. and headed out. It didn't take us long to get out there, considering we had about 60 to 70 knots up you know, on our tail. Got out there fairly quickly found a yacht which was in the general area which was under sail. We tried to contact them but had no luck and then as we were orbiting that craft on the horizon we saw a couple of red flares being shot off, so, we headed off to that area. Found the Solo Globe Challenger had been demasted, had no engine, no electrics, no communications at all. We spent possibly about 10 minutes trying to communicate with hand signals on what they wanted to do and finally we made the decision to get one of the crew members inside the aircraft. So we signalled him to jump off the boat into the water 'cause it's, it was very dangerous, if we tried to put someone down onto the yacht we would have injured them. So it's a lot safer to put them into the water. We got him in the aircraft within about 5 minutes and had a chat to him about what the condition of the crew were on the boat and the condition of the yacht itself. After a little

bit of a chat with him we decided to send down our, we have a portable marine radio that is usually taped to the rescue crewman's arm. I took that off him attached it to a high line which is just a rope and lowered it down to the other people on the yacht. They got it off and now we were able to chat with them verbally about they wanted to do. We found out that a few of their people were injured, two of them were with ribs, so they were a bit reluctant to be winched out, out of the yacht, understandably it'd be pretty painful. They decided that one other person wanted to come off, so we got him out of the, out of the yacht into the water, got him into the aircraft and shut up the aircraft and departed the, the area. After that we got another call from the Solo Globe Challenger that one other person wanted to be rescued, so we turned around reconfigured the aircraft for winching again and picked the third and last person up. After that we confirmed with them that we'd told HMAS Newcastle their location and what they wanted was just to be towed or escorted back to somewhere in shore. We were happy that they had communications at that stage, they still had on their account two E.P.I.R.B's, so you know, it was, they were in a fairly safe condition at that stage considering that the weather was abating a bit and we flew back for the long flight back considering, well, the headwind we had at that stage. A few of the guys had injuries, one guy had a, a broken leg and one other guy had facial

injuries from the winching. He got hit in the face by one of the shackles when a wave came along, so, we went back, landed at Mallacoota, correction it wasn't, oh, yeah, it was the oval at Mallacoota where we were met by ambulance crews and got the guys looked after and they were taken away to the hospitals in respective areas. We refuelled the aircraft, had a chat to AUSAR on the phone about what they wanted from us then and we went out for a search for other aircraft and other beacons after that.

Q12 To search for other vessels?

A For other vessels, yeah. There were multiple beacons going off, even beacons by themselves just floating in the water. Quite amazing the amount of you know, readings we'll get on our homer, where you know, we'd find one and, then you know, a minute later we'd find another one and home in on that and debris floating in the water as well.

Q13 Did you actually see any of the beacons floating in the water by themselves?

A Yeah, yeah. So, whether they'd been washed away or you know, they'd been thrown overboard or, or whatever.

Q14 How long did it take for you to get back after leaving the Solo Globe Challenger to Mallacoota after the second recovery was done?

A Once we left the yacht, it probably took us about a good hour to get back, so, considering it took us 20, 30 minutes to get out there, you know, we were doing

maybe 80 knots ground speed. So there was a fair, fair amount of wind on the nose.

Q15 Have you got any flying experience yourself?

A I do, yeah.

Q16 Do you have a commercial licence a - - -

A No, I don't, in the process of getting that at the moment.

Q17 O.K. So you're undergoing examinations and all - - -

A Yeah.

Q17 - - - - that sort of thing. Have you, and, and taking into account your military background - - -

A Yeah.

Q17 - - - - have you ever experienced weather conditions like that before?

A I have, I've done a few sorties in the military that have been in weather conditions like that and at night time and on N.V.G. as well, so, a bit more difficult. It you know, you don't really realise how big the waves were until you actually see it later on on the footage, yeah, it was quite big.

Q18 What's N.V.G?

A Night vision goggles, yeah.

Q19 O.K. And you were out, you've been out searching for a number of hours?

A No. As soon as we got there we knew where we were going. It just ended up, it was about a 100 to 110 nautical miles off the coast, so, yeah, it was a fair way out there. I'd say we were pretty good in that, in

that way, we knew exactly what we were doing for each task. If a beacon went off we were called straight away, if we were ready and available to do the task we'd go and do it and as long as we know where the location is or the general area and there's a beacon going off in that area as well, we'll find it.

Q20 O.K. Pardon me. Were you at any time and still keeping in mind your military background ever fearful of your own life or were you concerned about the condition of the helicopter in those conditions?

A No. A lot of faith in these aircraft especially this one, it's a really tremendous work horse for this sort of job. It just does it so well. It was maybe a little bit distressing when you turn around to go back to shore and you got 60 knots on the nose and no land in sight you know, until you sit down and you start to do the calculations you have, we have, when we have a full aircraft around about 3 and a bit hours of fuel, so, I mean there was no drama. You know, always calculating when is our time which is you know, when are we going to turn around and head back to base so we can make it. It's always there in our minds so, you're constantly watching the fuel gauges.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q21 So as far as the morale of the crew from the Solo Globe, how were they?

A They were very happy to see us - - -

Q22 Yeah.

A - - - when we got them inside the, the aircraft. You don't, don't really have, get to have a good chat to them until the aircraft's shut down and you're back on land.

Q23 Right.

A When everything's a lot quieter and they're you know, they feel safe, they've got all their wet gear off and they've got blankets around them. You can actually chat to them later on. They were a bit apprehensive, I would call it, that they didn't have any communications or electrics or, or motor at all and they were just wallowing out there in the huge waves, so.

Q24 Yeah.

A But once we had given them the radio and we knew where they were and they knew that we'd told HMAS Newcastle they were fine. They elected to stay on the, the yacht and look after the other two injured survivors so I think they were very thankful - - -

Q25 Yeah.

A - - - once we'd found them.

Q26 As far as the hand signals that you were talking about a short time ago. How long did the hand signals between yourselves and them go on for?

A Quite a while. There's no, no real set sequence of hand signals to try and communicate with someone. Maybe in the military but you know, that's a different sort of scenario you know, you're trying to talk to

someone on a yacht who's wallowing around in waves trying to also steer his boat down the face of the waves. For you know, just basic sort of things you know, it was fairly easy once we decided what we were going to do - - -

Q27 Mmm.

A - - - to get them off the yacht into the water.

Q28 Mmm.

A Once we did that within a minute they were in the water
- - -

Q29 Mmm.

A - - - and ready to be picked up. And it takes us no more than a minute to get to them to - - -

Q30 Mmm.

A - - - winch them into the aircraft, so, maybe you know, we also discussed maybe they should have some sort of signal board or something - - -

Q31 Yeah.

A - - - set up so it does make it a little bit easier to communicate.

Q32 I was just going to say that, do you think there's room to get something like that, so a device both air crews and - - -

A Yeah.

Q32 - - - yacht crews so they're both aware - - -

A Well, that's right. Or like we have a portable sea radio, you know.

Q33 Yeah. Yeah. It's not necessarily a compulsory thing
 in - - -

A No.

Q33 - - - these races unfortunately.

A But you know, they spend thousands of dollars on their
 jackets and boots and all that.

Q34 Yeah.

A It's only a minor thing.

Q35 O.K. Now so far as winching. Can you explain some of
 the troubles that you had, I mean as a winch operator
 in those sort of conditions?

A Probably the first thing is the height. The higher you
 are from the area that you want to winch to it becomes
 very difficult to control the person on the, on the end
 of the wire. And try and place them exactly where it
 is. There's also a bit of a delay in the winch when
 you applicate a direction on the winch it lags for a
 couple of seconds before it goes to full speed. So if
 you want to lower someone down quickly it's not the
 quickest thing. You have to be ahead of the aircraft
 all the time to know exactly when to get the person
 where you want him. Yeah, the major thing was probably
 the height. As you, you get the person to where it's
 a, a stable sort of height where he's not going to be
 impacting the waves every 5 seconds - - -

Q36 Mmm.

A - - - and being wrenched out of the water as well every
 5 seconds. You get him just skipping across the

surface of the, the tops of the waves until he's around about the area where you can put him in the water and lay out a heap of slack of the cable, so he can actually swim to the person.

Q37 Yeah. Yeah. Your experience in you know, and your military experience and your civilian experience of helicopters and that style of thing. Can you rate the over, the overall conditions for us on a scale of one to 10, as far as your position?

A As in 10 being the worst?

Q38 Yeah.

A I would, it would be an eight I think.

Q39 Right.

A 10 being the same sort of conditions but not - - -

Q40 Mmm.

A - - - this aircraft isn't capable of doing over water rescues at night in those sort of conditions.

Q41 Right.

A Some of the other aircraft in our fleet do but they weren't available at the time, so, yeah, I'd say an eight.

Q42 Yeah. O.K. Dave, anything on Winston Churchill?

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

Q43 With the, the Winston Churchill, you, you did some searching for that?

A I did.

Q44 O.K. How long did that take?

A We'd actually gone and had probably another two sorties after the Solo Globe Challenger to go out and search for different people. I know the, the British sailor, Brian, I think his name was or - - -

Q45 Glen?

A Glen.

Q46 Glen Charles?

A Yeah. We actually searched for him a fair bit, you know, we used a hole tank of juice searching the area where he was but we didn't locate him. Then we went out after that looking for the Winston Churchill specifically, didn't find them, went back refuelled and then got a, a phone call from AUSAR saying that they had a possible sighting of the life raft. So we jumped in the aircraft and took off headed out to the area, it ended up being around about 90 nautical miles to 100 nautical mile off the coast. With civilian fixed wing aircraft circling this lift raft, which we really didn't see amongst all the troughs and the waves, the white water, until we were virtually on top of it. The only reason why we could virtually fly straight in on it was because of the fixed wing aircraft because every time he banked away sharply was where the life, life raft was. We got him, did a circuit, came around into wind and it wasn't til then that as we were approaching that was the entrance to the life raft. It was a fairly small life raft I thought and we thought there was maybe one or two people in it and it wasn't til we

came around that we saw a few more. There was, ended up being four people out of the raft -- -

Q47 Mmm.

A - - - and we did the rescue and it wasn't til we were actually on our way home that we found out that they were from the Winston Churchill and once we'd shut up and we'd got out to, get a chance to talk to them and say, Where are you from? And they said the Winston Churchill, and you can imagine the elation. 'Cause you know, we, it was just at the end of the tether for everyone, given up hope for these guys, so, and considering they started at 20 nautical miles off the coast and ended up so far away so quickly attested to the, the size of the waves and the wind.

Q48 What did you do to the life raft of Winston Churchill, was there any specific instructions you were given?

A Later on after we'd actually departed the area, we actually discussed and also were asked by AUSAR, I think it was AUSAR or, or maybe through one of the fixed wing aircraft flying in the area, whether we could actually puncture the raft. Later on we went to try and find it again but we couldn't find it again, once the weight's out of it would have just taken off. Yeah, we probably should have punctured it and it is now a standard thing with us. If we pull someone out of a raft, we'll pop it or stick a knife into it and puncture it so it'll sink because there was a fair few life rafts floating out there with no one in them -

- -

Q49 Mmm.

A - - - at the end of it.

Q50 Was it the case that you came across a number of life rafts on, on several occasions?

A Probably one other. I don't know where it was from but yeah, one, one other life raft after that one. I don't think we actually spotted 'em, there was no one in 'em. So, and whether it had, had been washed over the side of a yacht or something, who knows. Actually after we got the guys out of the Winston Churchill we located another beacon and actually hardly I think it was not even 30 seconds after we'd, we picked up a signal and followed the, the homer in onto the target, searched around this area and we were right over the top of it, we couldn't see it but it was there somewhere and we actually put it down to, it was from the Winston Churchill. Their E.P.I.R.B. the antennae had broken off and it had actually broken loose from a life raft as well. And it was actually that one that, which was more or less following them, we actually homed in on, so they do actually work if the antenna's broken. We were fairly close to it, so it was pretty easy to pick up.

Q51 With the life rafts and you being an observer and winch operator, did you have any difficulty finding them or locating them in those conditions?

A I'd say, yes. They're not the easiest things to spot in those sort of conditions. You know, some of those waves were 70 foot high as well as white water. The yachts are a lot harder to find because they're the same of sort of shading, the same white colour and compared to the size of the waves, the life rafts are quite small.

Q52 How did you gauge the wave heights?

A Just through my experience, that's what I do, I, I judge distances, you know. It's a major part of my job so. Also you know, the altimeter, radar altimeter you know, gives you a height and when it's dropping from 10 feet down to 90 to 100 feet you know that the aircraft's not rising you know and falling that much, so it's definitely the waves.

Q53 Mmm.

A And you can, you're also judging the distance on the, on the cable, right. One minute the guy's in the water and then he's out of the water you know, so - - -

Q54 Yeah.

A - - - they're big sort of waves.

Q55 Mmm. Do you or are you aware of another raft belonging to the Winston Churchill and somebody being recovered from that?

A Yes. Once we got the guys back to Mallacoota and along the way we were having a chat to them and we actually got their names and talked to them about the other life raft and - - -

Q56 Mmm.

A - - - found out that they'd actually been attached to the life raft for a while before it broke free.

Q57 Right.

A They actually were inside of it for a couple of hours you know, bobbing up and down near them before they lost sight of it in the dark and when we actually got back and were actually searching that afternoon we concluded that if you know, once we found out where these guy, the first guys were from the Winston Churchill, the other guys were going to be pretty close.

Q58 Right.

A So we decided to go probably an hour to a half an hour before last light. So if they did find them we were there ready to go.

Q59 Right.

A As dusk was coming on, one of the other guys, Steve Collins, brought up the fact that the guys had all had torches around their necks on lanyards. We'd actually rung up AUSAR to ring back to Mallacoota to where the other Winston Churchill crew were, whether their whole crew had torches as well and strobes and they got back to us and said, yes, they had. So this was the time we were going to find them with lights and it was getting pretty dark, so, we actually spoke to the P3 Orion crew who were fairly close to us, maybe 3 or 4 nautical mile, we could see them doing their search and dropping

their flares that this is what they should start to look for and within 5 minutes they'd found them and at that stage you know, we were 20 minutes flying time away but we couldn't do anything anyway, we'd get there and we were on min fuel at that stage, we had to turn around. We could have hovered above them but couldn't have winched them out and, and it was dark anyway, and we legally can't do that at night time and it was too dark, so. A horrible feeling flying away and the guys are still out there and you're so close and it wasn't until, what, 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock in the morning that the navy got to them, so. But it wouldn't have made any difference to the other guys anyway - - -

Q60 Mmm.

A - - - 'cause it happened probably 24 hours before, yeah.

Q61 All right. Is there, is there anything you'd like to say in relation to your observations of the conditions, the, the rescue, the way that things were conducted? The way that the, any improvements be on - - -

A Yeah. One thing, yeah, one thing I, I, we all said right from the start was the crews on these yachts go out and spend millions and millions of dollars on their yachts. Their masts, their sails you know, they'll spend \$1,000.00 on a jacket, \$500.00 on a pair of boots, \$1,000.00 on a pair of pants - - -

Q62 Mmm.

A - - - all that sort of thing but they won't go and spend 2 or \$300.00 on a personal E.P.I.R.B. If everyone had had a personal E.P.I.R.B. then we would have picked them all out of the water within an hour. That's you know, that's what we do, we home in on beacons, it's the easiest way to pick someone up. We constantly do beacon searches out in Bass Strait down here.

Q63 Right.

A Down at Wilson's Promontory you know, albeit a lot of them are mistaken beacons you know, ones that have gone off by accident or something like that but we home in on beacons, that's what we do. The cooperation from AUSAR and all the, all the other civilian organisations was tremendous. There were so many aircraft out there, we were doing searches within 300 metres of other aircraft. The intensity, once we had locations and general areas where these people might be we were all there. We were all faxed different search areas, given our grids that we had to do and our spacings. All of this were given to us by AUSAR, amazing sort of organisation, they did a tremendous job and it really did show within our people that we actually pulled out of the water, right.

Q64 You're familiar with the, the operations of the homing devices on board the aircraft?

A I am.

Q65 And you're familiar with the frequencies of the beacons?

A I am, yeah.

Q66 What are your thoughts on a situation like this happening again with the, with a large amount of 121.5 megahertz beacons going off and the confusion of that number interfering with the, with the rescue capabilities of your homing device?

A Yeah. I, I can see where you're coming from. If you have say four E.P.I.R.B's in the general area that you're trying to home in on each signal will interfere with the other signals with that. Even to the point where guys who have two E.P.I.R.B's on their yacht activate both of them they really interfere with each other you know, they should have one on or none on. It's a waste of battery having both on at the same time and it doesn't mean that we're going to get there any quicker. Maybe in this sort of thing they should have personalised E.P.I.R.B's. I don't know, on slightly different frequencies, that might help, I don't know, it's, it's a difficult sort of thing. I mean the close proximity to all the different rescues is a big factor with beacons going off. If we can find someone and pull them out of the water, I mean that's one less beacon going off and they're you know, it helps a lot but we get around it. When you get fairly close to a beacon the strength is unbelievable you know, it's quite easy to home in on, so.

Q67 Are you familiar with the 4-0-6 beacon, the name stamped, for want of a better word beacons?

A No.

Q68 O.K.

A No, I don't really know the different brand names.

Q69 O.K. Right. Well, it's a different frequency - - -

A Right.

Q69 - - - the type of E.P.I.R.B.

SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q70 Steve, just in relation to the Winston Churchill crew, did any of them tell you what happened from memory?

A Yeah. I was speaking to Richard Winning who is the owner of the boat. And he said they were quite happily sailing, sailing along and they were broadsided by a huge wave and then straight after it they were broadsided by another one and the next thing they knew is looking into the side of his boat. He said the wave, the second wave, or the first wave must, must have weakened the hull and then the second wave just tore it off, tore the side of the boat apart and he had just enough time to go inside and grab the radio - - -

Q71 Mmm.

A - - - and if you watch the video footage from the ABC chopper that's when he makes a rescue and says he's getting the life rafts on deck. Yeah, he said, within you know, a matter of minutes the yacht was gone. It just happened so quickly.

Q72 Right.

A He said you know, two waves, one after the other, bang, bang, straight into the side of the boat - - -

Q73 Mmm.

A - - - you know what I mean? Yeah. Not a good thing to happen.

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSON

Q74 Mmm. Is there anything you'd like now to add, feel free to take the time just to add your thoughts that you feel that would assist us.

A Of all the guys that we pulled out of the water, the 15 people, I think the guys from the Winston Churchill were probably the best prepared. They had standard sort of equipment for all their crew, they all had strobes and all had torches on lanyards around their neck. It was just unfortunate that the size of the conditions and the waves, forced them apart, lost their E.P.I.R.B, flipped their rafts over twice, that sort of thing. It's just an incident you know, it's not, you, you can't really help that sort of thing, they were big waves. But apart from the rest of it, all the organisation, the, the team work, even the, the ladies at Mallacoota who every time we came back and landed we were given a sandwich and a cup of coffee - - -

Q75 Mmm.

A - - - just out of nowhere, they'd just appear out of nowhere, coming and grabbing guys from their yachts and taking them to their homes to give them a shower and

give them clothes and blankets and somewhere to sleep,
yeah. A great sort of thing to happen.

Q76 O.K. The time by my watch is now 2.06pm, this
interview is now concluded.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED