

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Ray Stone and Detective Senior Constable Walpole at the Queanbeyan Police Station on Thursday the 3rd of June, 1999. Also present is Senior Constable Woods, who is seated to Mr Stone's right. The time by my watch is 3.04pm, eastern standard time. Mr Stone, as I have already explained to you, Constable Woods and I are making inquiries in relation to your involvement in rescue operations carried out during the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, do you understand that?

A Yes.

Q2 Do you agree that prior to the commencement of this interview I told you I intended asking you further questions about this matter?

A Yes.

Q3 Do you agree that I told you that my questions and any answers you gave to those questions would be electronically recorded on three audio tapes as the interview took place?

A Yes.

Q4 Do you agree I also told you that at the conclusion of the interview you would be given an audio cassette taped copy of the interview?

A Yes.

Q5 Are you happy to be interviewed in this manner?

A Yes.

Q6 For the purpose of the interview, can you state your

full name?

A Raymond Charles Stone.

Q7 And can you tell me your date of birth?

A 11th of October, 1955.

Q8 Could you tell me your current address?

A 123 Shepherd Road, Bywong, New South Wales, 2621.

Q9 Can you tell me your occupation?

A Helicopter pilot.

Q10 Are you currently employed in that capacity?

A No.

Q11 Have you been employed in recent times in that capacity?

A Yes.

Q12 Can you give me some details concerning that employment?

A The most recent employment was from 1989 to May the 2nd, 1999, with Helicopters.

Q13 It's my understand that you have recently performed duties for Southcare, is that right?

A That's correct.

Q14 Can you tell me what those duties entailed?

A A lone pilot flying a single pilot rescue helicopter.

Q15 Can you, can you tell me your qualifications, Mr Stone?

A With respect to the helicopter, I held an airline transport licence, brackets, helicopter with the a command rating.

Q16 Are you able to say or able to tell me, prior to this,

to the Sydney, Hobart Yacht Race, give me an idea of your flying time, what number of hours you, you may have flown up the that point?

A In the helicopters, in the order of 5,300 hours.

Q17 All right, as I've explained to you, this, this interview pertains to your role in rescue operations in the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. Can you give me a brief overview of your role in that rescue operation?

A Basically, we were tasked to go and perform a winch rescue from a disabled vessel, the Stand Aside, some distance of Mallacoota, approximately 70 nautical miles off Mallacoota at that point.

Q18 Can you tell me when, when you were tasked with that role?

A We were tasked with that role sometime after midday, I can't give you an exact time but it would've been in the order of 1.00 or 2 o'clock, we were en route from the Royal North Shore Hospital back to Canberra.

Q19 And I'm not sure I picked up the date then, can you tell me what date

A That was on the 27th of December.

Q20 All right, so you were tasked en route from Sydney back to, to Canberra, is that right?

A Correct.

Q21 Did, did that necessitate you coming back to Canberra before you, before you headed down towards Mallacoota or, or was it a - - -

A Yes, it did.

Q21 - - - re-direct?

A We had a requirement to refuel and also to pick up the right equipment.

Q22 All right, and I'll get into the details specifically of what happened on the 27th shortly. You've also mentioned to us earlier that you performed some sort of duties on the 28th and 29th of December?

A That's correct.

Q23 1998, can you just briefly mention your - - -

A On both of those days - - -

Q23 - - - role?

A Sorry, both of those days we were tasked as part of a, a major rescue operation to carry out creeping line searches at various locations offshore. We were still searching for a vessel, that was the Winston Churchill, and we were searching for a number of individuals who were believed to be still in the water. So that, that constituted the, the mission assignment for both days.

Q24 Right, and I'll clarify in more detail what actually went on, on those two days shortly, but now, going back to the 27th of December, when you were originally tasked to go, to go down and perform duties?

A Yep.

Q25 Other than yourself, who else was, had cause to be in the helicopter?

A The crew for that day, my crewman was Mark Delf and my paramedics were Kristy McAlister and Michelle Blewitt.

Q26 Did you know all of those people before, before this

particular day?

A Yes.

Q27 Can you explain to me what Mr Delf's role would be in the chopper?

A It's a rescue crew and he's basically responsible for the equipment after the, the cockpit, and in a winch rescue he is the winch operator.

Q28 And the, the two paramedics, are they there simply as paramedics, are they there simply as paramedics, not as crew members as such?

A No, they are crew members.

Q29 They are?

A Yes.

Q30 Do they perform functions on the helicopter other than first aid?

A Yes, they do, they, in a, they winch rescue, they are responsible for going down the wire.

Q31 All right. So on, on this, the 27th of December, you've indicated that you were tasked or alerted to, to an impending operation after midday?

A That's correct.

Q32 Can you take me through what occurred that day as, as of when you were down in the vicinity of Mallacoota and you commenced to fly out?

A Yes, O.K. We were actually originally tasked to go to Mallacoota as back-up. When we had departed Canberra and we were on route to Mallacoota we were then diverted to Merimbula with instructions to do a hot re-

fuel and then proceed directly to a set of coordinates that were passed to us, to carry out winching operations.

Q33 All right, and can you now take me, take me further ahead to, to when you were actually out flying on your way to do what it was that you were tasked to do?

A O.K. We departed Merimbula in, in fairly unpleasant weather, it was very gusty, very strong winds, but as we progressed out over the sea, over the ocean, the wind picked up considerably from around 20 to 30 knots to around 60 to 70 knots, the cloud ceiling at the same time was reducing, I estimated, was anywhere between 200 and 300 feet when we got on site, and the sea state picked up to the point where we, my crew member and I both independently estimated it was running in the order of 20 metres, so the, en route to the position we discussed how we would approach the rescue, having regard to the fact that if the vessel still had its mast intact, we would have to, to carry out one approach and if it had been dismasted, we could go straight and winch straight off the vessel. Nearing the co-ordinates, I got a visual sighting of a vessel, we flew towards it, I was quite concerned to see that it still had its, its mast re-intact, at the same time there was some confusion as to whether that was the correct vessel or not, the communications were very poor because, there was no command control aircraft in place that could give us the information that we

needed. While we were debating whether this was the vessel or not, further to the north which would have been on my left, I saw the line of a, of a hovering helicopter that was probably five miles away. We diverted to that position to find Helimed 1 in the process of winching the first of the survivors off the Stand Aside. The vessel itself had been dismasted, it had also had much of the superstructure taken off the top. We held in a wide orbit, well clear of the other aircraft, waiting while he finished his winching operations, I noticed that they were having some difficulty getting survivors off, so we discussed how best to approach the rescue. My crewman was preparing the paramedics for the rescue, basically were, we were just holding off, holding off in an orbit waiting for our turn. Once Helimed had winched eight of the survivors off, they departed and we flew in, there were four individuals still left on the vessel, they were stringing a raft to the, to the aft of the vessel and when we approached into the hover, two survivors climbed into the raft and they stringed the raft behind the vessel. We attempted to hover to, I beg your pardon, to winch to the raft, but the raft was continually knocked over. It was knocked over both by breaking waves and it was picked up by the wind at the crest of the waves. I am a little unclear on exactly, of the precise details, but in general terms, Kristy McAlister was the first of the paramedics to go down

the wire, she went down, she had some difficulty getting the survivor, I think she was in the raft and they got knocked out, but in any event, she picked up one survivor out of the water, we winched him on board, she went down a second time, virtually the same thing happened, we winched her to a survivor in the water, she picked him up and came up. By that time she'd spent quite a deal of her time underwater, at one stage perhaps 30 seconds, and was unable to go down the, the two paramedics swapped the winching gear so Michelle Blewitt then went down the wire for the second, for the last two. The first of her missions down the winch, the winch cable was fouled by the, the painter from the, joining the raft to the vessel and became quite severely tangled. She was, she can tell her own story. We were concerned that she wouldn't be able to get the, the winch cable free of the painter. She took her jay knife and actually cut the raft free which is probably the best thing she could've done, it shouldn't have, shouldn't have been there in the first place, the raft was then carried off at quite a rate of knots by the wind. She winched the first of her patients from the water into the helicopter, they left the skipper on board, my crew motioned to the, to the skipper to attach himself to the line that had been attached to the raft, which he did, then he jumped in, swam away from the vessel and we picked him up, it was a very simple one. That accounted for all the crew on the

Stand Aside, so we departed for Mallacoota on the orders of the rescue control, the RCC. We were flying into very strong headwinds, I estimated, we started off with a ground speed of about 35 knots, it was, we flew through, through, a squall line had been approaching so we flew into the squall line, back to Mallacoota at about 50 feet, landed at Mallacoota, discharged our patients and we were then tasked with another search mission but we were low on fuel, there was no fuel at Mallacoota so we went back to Merimbula. By the time we got fuel, it was dark and a replacement crew was on the way and that was basically the end of my involvement that day.

Q34 All right. Sounds pretty ordinary, doesn't it? Yeah, we, obviously, we're going to speak to, to the other people you've nominated and then obviously, they're obviously in a better position to, to detail the problems that might have been had with winching equipment et cetera.

A Yeah.

Q35 Just some questions first in relation to the, to the weather. Had you been given any advice prior to leaving the mainland about what sort of weather conditions you might have been going to encounter?

A No.

Q36 Is that normal?

A It was a very abnormal situation. It happened very quickly I gather.

Q37 You've mentioned wind speeds of 20 to 30 knots when you left the mainland increasing to 60 or 70 knots at the scene of the rescue - - -

A Yes.

Q37 - - - is that right?

A Yep.

Q38 You also mentioned that you were, you've gone out over a, a yacht.

A Yep.

Q39 Which I take it, wasn't the one you'd been tasked to look for in the, is that right, in the - - -

A That's correct.

Q40 Yes, do you know which yacht that was?

A I'm sorry, I don't.

Q41 When, the mention you've made of 20 metres, an estimate of 20 metres made by yourself and your crewmen, that, that relates to the height of the waves you're dealing with?

A That's, that's the extent of the wave face.

Q42 Yes.

A The vessel, where it was pointing straight up, the wave was, the wave was half as high again as the vessel was long, this was about a 40 footer. The Stand Aside.

Q43 Right. It's my understanding, there's an item of equipment that, that assists you in measuring the distance between the top of the waves and the bottom of your chopper, is that right?

A Radar antenna.

Q44 That's, yes, all right. So Ult-rad, is that - - -
A Rad-ult.
Q45 Rad-ult, also known - - -
A Yep.
Q45 - - - known as Rad-ult, ult.
A That's the one.
Q46 You had that equipment on your - - -
A That's correct.
Q46 - - - on your helicopter? Was it, did you utilise that
to make any of your determinations about - - -
A No.
Q46 - - - wave size?
A The, the equipment wasn't able to keep up with the rate
of change of the terrain under it.
Q47 In terms of your flying experience, how, how would you
rate the weather conditions you encountered at the, at
the rescue site?
A Among the worst I've seen.
Q48 Can you, what, what about visibility?
A Visibility was, was fair.
Q49 And what, what sort of scale do you measure that?
A I had no, I had no trouble maintaining a hover
visually. The point to remember is that hovering over
water there are no visual cues.
Q50 Yes.
A So I, I had to keep my vision very close to the
aircraft and I was hovering on, my visual cues were
patches of foam, they actually don't move as the waves

do, so - - -

Q51 Yes.

A - - - I mean, I wasn't trying to see to, see to Tasmania or anything, but I had no problem doing that.

Q52 All right, the four people that you've brought on board from the yacht Stand Aside?

A Yes.

Q53 Had any of them to you knowledge, sustained injuries?

A No, I, I really didn't have any chance to, to do anything other than glance at a couple of the individuals.

Q54 Yes, I appreciate that's probably a better question to be asking others that were involved. Can you just run me through what you, what you consider or what is the normal procedure for the removal of people from yachts to helicopters and particularly in those conditions?

A The, the process used depends on the conditions. In these circumstances, it, it would have been easier to take them out of the water. On a calm day you can winch straight to the vessel, if the vessel has a rigging up then we have to use what's called a, a shot line and, and physically pull, pull your rescue crewman onto the vessel. In this situation, we could only work with what we had, so the, given the fact that the raft was a total liability, it, the easiest way for us to tackle a rescue like that is to take the people out of the water.

Q55 And that, that, in the conditions is recognised as best

practice?

A I, I would say yes. Again, it, it's something we're, the crew has to flexible, you're given a set of conditions to work with and you simply have to use your, your training and your commonsense to - - -

Q56 Yes.

A - - - effect the rescue.

Q57 Senior Constable Woods, at this stage, any questions?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q58 Just quickly, you mentioned before that the winch was fouled on a painter?

A Yeah.

Q59 Would you just describe what's, what a painter is?

A That's just a tether from the, from the yacht, securing the raft to the yacht.

Q60 O.K. Right.

A It's just a rope.

Q61 And then just one other thing, you, you mentioned before you were receiving radio commands from somewhere, was there some sort of protocol or set line of command that you, you were receiving commands from, like, a home base or who was it that you normally use?

A The, the Rescue Coordination Centre, once it's set up, it's, it's based in Merimbula, was relaying all the communications through the Commander Control Aircraft that was permanently in relays, different aircraft permanently posted overhead. When we arrived there was a, I believe it was an area commander, I have no idea

where it was from. They were holding in lull but around the scene as well, there had been an ABC helicopter there, but by and large, we were on our own. It was too early in the piece, yeah, it was basically chaos when we first arrived, so all we could do was go there and effect the rescue.

Q62 And then again, you said with respect to advice, with respect to the weather, you said you basically had none, so what were the conditions you had prior, earlier in the day coming from - - -

A We - - -

Q62 - - - Royal North Shore to south?

A We had been flying in extremely unfriendly weather all day, in fact, by the middle of the day at least one of my paramedics, I think both of them, had been airsick because the same weather system that generated this whole catastrophe was also producing high temperatures even at relatively high altitude, strong winds and extreme turbulence, so the weather had been very, very user unfriendly all day, basically.

Q63 And, and as a pilot, obviously you'd take a lot of note of the weather?

A Yes.

Q64 On a day to day basis, had you, to your knowledge, received any sort of indication of this inclement weather coming through over the previous days?

A No, the, the aviation forecasts that we work on stick to, stick, they stick to information that's relevant to

the operation of the flight. So I can read the weather and make a judgment in general terms of what it means, but, but really I had to stick to the facts. I, I can only plan on the forecast winds, it, it gives me an idea of the conditions I will encounter, but, you know, being told a severe turbulence is a lot different to actually flying through it, so I did have a guide, the, when I say we had no advice as to weather offshore, it didn't come as a great surprise.

Q65 Nothing further.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q66 Just so I don't forget, Ray, you did mention in one of your answers to me earlier that communications were poor. Can you just elaborate on what you mean by that?

A The, it wasn't so much that communication was poor, in the first instance there was not a lot of information available. And it's a, it's a fairly salient point that we would, we were tasked at first to go to Mallacoota as back-up when in fact, Helimed 1 had already headed out to the scene.

Q67 Yes. And you, just in relation to one of the questions Jason just asked you, in, you used the word "chaos" to describe when you first got to the area, can you just elaborate on what you might mean by that?

A It was chaos in terms of the, the weather conditions and the, the effect that they had had obviously on one vessel in particular and probably, you know, we were painfully aware that there were a number of vessels out

there.

Q68 Yes.

A So I don't mean chaos in the, in terms of, you know, human disorganisation, I just mean chaos.

Q69 On, on this particular mission, that on the 27th of December, did you experience any problem specifically related to your chopper, helicopter?

A No.

Q70 Are you aware of any problems that might relate to equipment contained therein?

A Yes.

Q71 And can you just elaborate on that for me?

A The, the roll equipment that was put on board the aircraft did not include crew vests for the two paramedics and unfortunately I was not aware of that omission until after, well after the mission.

Q72 What, what are crew vests, just for the purposes of the interview?

A A crew vest is an inflatable vest which also contains an ELB or locater beacon, flares and other survival equipment.

Q73 So when you did respond in the first instance, how many of these crew vests would have been on board the helicopter?

A Two.

Q74 Any other problems in relation to equipment from your knowledge - - -

A Not - - -

Q74 - - - these equipment, obviously we're going to ask everybody.

A For sure, not at the onset, but we did damage the winch cable when the raft fouled the cable.

Q75 And that, that was during this first - - -

A During the rescue, yeah.

Q75 - - - rescue, yes. Is there anything that the sailors, the four sailors that you rescued on Stand Aside, is there anything that they could've done that may have impacted on what you had to do? Made it easier?

A It's, it's difficult for me to say, I understand that one of the individuals was insisting he be taken first, I also understand that the, the kind of life jackets they were wearing made it very difficult to get the winch harness over the top so the girls ended up taking them under the bottom. My, my general impression of their equipment was that it was very poor.

Q76 Can you elaborate any further on, on what you mean by that?

A The, these individuals that we picked up were dressed, basically, in, like, we are, in street clothes.

Q77 Yes.

A In jeans, shirts, the skipper was dressed in either an emergent suit or foul weather gear, but most of the other guys were just totally inadequately, inadequately dressed.

Q78 What, what was the air temperature, do you think, or do you know at the, the rescue site?

A I think, I think it was around, in the order of 10 degrees.

Q79 All right, and, and this issue you've just raised concerning the difficulty the, they had with these life jackets, as in the difficulties that your people encountered with these life jackets, is there a recommendation that you could put forward or is there something you could suggest should be standard practice in relation to that area?

A I, I - - -

Q80 For, for people involved in this yacht race, for example?

A I'm surprised that they weren't wearing more, either more up to date equipment or equipment that would facilitate their survival for an extended period in the water, ie, a vest.

Q81 Yes.

A As opposed to just the over the head and tied round the front.

Q82 So it would be the case that that equipment is on the market and exists?

A Definitely.

Q83 O.K. Is there any other, anything else that you can think of that the sailors themselves could have done to make this rescue more efficient? Or their rescue more efficient, I should say.

A I think, having seen the raft go over probably half a dozen times, they could have, they seemed very

reluctant to abandon the idea of staying in life raft, even though they were dumped in the water, they climbed back into it, and they'd get dumped in again. Look, I'd hate to be down there doing what they're doing and I'm pretty sure I'd be holding onto the raft as well, but in this situation it was a death trap.

Q84 Bear with me, Ray - - -

A Sure.

Q84 - - - while I go through my list of questions. You've made a comment to me on your observations of the weather.

A Mm.

Q85 And it wasn't very good. Have you flown in or encountered worse conditions from a helicopter pilot's perspective?

A Yes, but only in the, in the process of carrying out another emergency operation. Cyclone rescues in the Timor Sea.

Q86 Can you put an approximate time on how long you were off the mainland, as in when you had left the mainland, done what you had done, and put the people down for treatment?

A In the order of two hours.

Q87 And how long are you fuelled to fly at any one time?

A Three and a half hours,

Q88 So this, and this rescue we're talking about, on the 27th of December, was a afternoon rescue?

A Afternoon into evening.

Q89 Had it gotten dark as in your normal night-time dark, while, while you were out there?

A No.

Q90 Did you suffer any injuries at that, that day?

A None whatsoever.

Q91 And what about your crew?

A My crewman was winched from the aircraft, it's, it's normal practice to guide the winch cable with one hand while driving, driving with the other. When the cable fouled and the raft took off, it, it pulled the cable to, what he described as a, an excessive angle, he was actually dragged from the aircraft.

Q92 Right, and sustained some sort of injury?

A He, he is still complaining of a sore shoulder, so soft tissue, I guess.

Q93 And the, the two paramedics, to your knowledge?

A Sea water ingestion.

Q94 No, no sort of physical injuries that you were aware of?

A No.

Q95 Did you have any personal fears during the course of what went on that afternoon?

A It was very daunting to look at, it was very daunting to watch the other aircraft carrying out its rescues, but once it had departed, there was no, none.

Q96 Have you got anything at this stage?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q97 Just one thing, just on that, the type of aircraft you

were flying, it's rated to what sort of conditions, anything worse than what you were in, or -?

A The, the aircraft doesn't care whether it's travelling at 70 knots through still air or it's sitting in a hover with 70 knots air blowing over it, it doesn't, it doesn't know the difference.

Q98 Right, so what I'm, you, could there become a period of time with weather conditions, that it would be unsafe to fly?

A Only in terms of, nothing structurally unsafe for the aircraft, the main hazards would be poor visibility, certainly with 70 knots in the hover, it was actually of significant assistance because it means we can hover with a lot of power so that was working in our favour. The aircraft, there was, in fact, in that situation even if we'd lost one engine we probably could've still flown away, which doesn't happen often in a hover over water, I mean, usually you're committed to a ditch.

Q99 Could, could you, would you be able to say how many flying hours you've racked up in that helicopter? Approximately?

A I gave my totals, I just applied for a job recently and I had to tally them up, I think I got about 900, I think about 900 hours flying time.

Q100 Can you, did you have any verbal contact with the, with any of the four that were brought on board?

A None. I gave the skipper a thumbs up when we were departing up.

Q101 Were you able to gain any notion as to their, sort of reaction when they came on board, or -?

A Stunned.

Q102 Grateful?

A No.

Q103 No?

A Stunned.

Q104 Stunned, all right. So who, in, in a, a rescue of this type, are you answerable to, when you're out there?

A We, we are tasked by the ACT Ambulance Service.

Q105 All right.

A But in this case the AUSSAR have responsibility for the, for the mission. So we were, we would, we were communicating directly with them in terms of, of them allocating missions and stuff like that.

Q106 Did you have any problems with your communication equipment?

A No.

Q107 If you were asked to make any recommendations about how anything to do with this yacht race could be made better, would you be able to offer any thoughts?

A Definitely with the survival equipment on board the vessels, to my mind is, was just totally inadequate. You know, if the boat only needs a certain number of life jackets to pass survey, that's one thing, but I'm not sure they, they have to conform to any standards and that's where the problem is.

Q108 Anything else you feel is relevant or might be

relevant?

A No, they were unlucky.

Q109 Was there anything, or were you aware, how can I put that, the indications are that this, the weather that the fleet encountered was far worse than was anticipated, much, much worse. Is it the case that you certainly wouldn't have had any inkling of the type of weather that you were going to encounter out there?

A No, it would've been impossible to sit there and say, look, I reckon 70 miles offshore it's going to be blowing at 70 knots and, in 20 minutes, you, had to be there.

Q110 Glad I wasn't.

A Take up sailing.

Q111 Right, in relation to the 27th of December, anything else you want to ask?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q112 Just one last thing, in relation to the communications, you stated they were poor, did there come a point during this mission with the Stand Aside that they seemed to improve things, sort of were coordinated better or -?

A We, there's no requirement for it. Once, once we arrived on the scene, we could see, we could see what we had to do basically, and there was no need for any sort of discussion, there are your four guys, pick them up and get them back to dry land. So are you talking about external communications or internal?

Q113 Well, just more so, like, were you on an open frequency to be able to hear distress signals or just chatter from other missions that were going on, or -?

A No, we were on a, on an aviation frequency so we were in communication with other aircraft in the area that were on the same frequency so we were able to talk to Helimed and we were in brief contact with the ABC helicopter before he racked off, and we were also talking to the area commander. So I'm pretty sure, a bit further down the track, next day I think they had a discreet frequency for us to operate on but at that point, nobody really knew what was going on out there, so it was situation normal as far as the, the comms went.

Q114 O.K. Right. What time were you stood down that day or did you stand down?

A About, I handed over at about 2100, just from memory.

Q115 We'll move forward now to the, the 28th of December. Can you run through your activities again on that day?

A Yep. We, we flew down to Merimbula on a fixed wing and took over from the night crew, I think that was at about, 10.00 in the morning and then we were tasked with the first of our creeping line searches. I think at that stage we were still looking for the Winston Churchill or individuals off the Winston Churchill.

Q116 Can you just explain what a creeping line search is, mate?

A Sorry, we are given a block, right, an area search, and

we search that by traversing the area, putting an increment in of about 500 metres then going back 500 metres, back, so we just creep along the line.

Q117 Yep, were you working with the same crew on this day as
 -?

A No, I had a different crewman, George Casey, but my, I
 had the same paramedics.

Q118 Right, would, so what happened through the course of
 the day, on

A We covered a significant, I mean, significant amount of
 water. The, perhaps the, the most memorable event of
 that day was we picked up a distress beacon on 1215 and
 homed on that with the aircraft homer and came across
 the Business Post Naiad, now we hadn't been aware that
 this aircraft, that this vessel had already been
 visited by another rescue crew. When we found the
 Naiad, we saw an individual lying in the cockpit and,
 and this actually is, is a point that, that really
 should be made, we spent 20 minutes of valuable time
 tracking a distress beacon and flying around a vessel
 where the only occupants were both dead. Not only were
 they both deceased, the paramedics in particular were
 extremely distressed to learn later on that no
 paramedic or rescue crewman had confirmed that they
 were, in fact, deceased. Now, when we found this
 vessel and were preparing, basically going into winch
 circuit, I called the CNC aircraft, told them we'd
 found the vessel, that there was somebody on board, we

were preparing a winch, they said, "No, he's deceased", basically, head off.

INTERVIEW SUSPENDED

INTERVIEW RESUMED

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q119 This is a continuation of a interview between Detective Senior Constable Walpole and Ray Stone at the Queanbeyan Police Station on Thursday, the 3rd of June, 1999. This is tape number two. Also present, Senior Constable Woods. If you can recall where you were when the tape stopped, Ray - - -

A O.K.

Q119 - - - you can feel free to continue.

A We orbited, prepared to winch and we were told by the aircraft that the crew had already been taken off, that the only people remaining on board were both deceased, and that we could continue our creeping line search. And as I was saying, it was particularly distressing for the paramedics because no-one had, had officially confirmed that they, the two left on board were deceased and we also spent some valuable time tracking the beacon.

Q120 How, how did you find out that someone had determined these people to be dead?

A The, just in communication with the aircraft, they, their transmission was, "No, they're deceased", basically, go back to your search. And we didn't argue the point at that stage but then again, we hadn't been

informed that no-one had been on board that vessel to put hands on these individuals.

Q121 Yeah. So, that opinion's obviously been formed by members of the crew who'd - - -

A Correct.

Q121 - - - been pulled off, off the boat?

A That's correct.

Q122 Who we can probably take it as said, aren't trained medical - - -

A Who were in a - - -

Q122 - - - people.

A - - - great state of distress themselves.

Q123 Capable of certifying someone deceased or otherwise. All right, can you continue on?

A The rest of the day consisted of, I think we did two sorties that day, they were in the order of about two and a half hours each, with a break in between for some food and fuel. At the end of the day, we were taken off the task and I flew the aircraft back to Canberra.

Q124 All right, how, how were the weather conditions on this day?

A They, they had subsided quite significantly.

Q125 And the ocean conditions from your observations?

A The sea state again, it was, it was still pretty rough but the, the real power had gone out of it, so I, I don't even recall thinking it was remarkable.

Q126 So did you on that particular day, effect any rescues?

A No.

Q127 Your, your own equipment that day or start with the helicopter, was there any problems that day?

A No.

Q128 Equipment connected with your helicopter?

A No.

Q129 So comparing it to the day before, can you paint a picture for us?

A Yeah, the, it was still, it was still very rough, I mean, I'm not trying to make it sound frivolous when I say that the power had gone out of it, but it was, it was not the kind of ocean that you look at, and when you think that a number of boats would be torn apart by it, whereas the day before it seemed impossible that any vessel could withstand it. We saw a number of vessels heading into shore and although they were clearly, you know, being these fairly heavy conditions, there was, there was no sense of impending doom.

Q130 As a result of your activities and/or observations through that particular day, the 28th, is there anything you could recommend that could be done better, either on your part, the rescue part or the people involved in the race?

A The, just that issue of not having the information about the Business Post Naiad and the fact that we had spent, we had spent some time tracking the beacon and also aircraft and it was, it was difficult in terms of morale because we got set up to pull somebody off the vessel who was alive and, you know, they

weren't, so.

Q131 Do you know how long before you had got over the top of that boat that the people had actually been removed from it?

A It wouldn't have been long, it probably would've been in the order of five minutes between when we determined that there was a vessel, there was something on board, and when, when we were re-tasked, sent back on another task.

Q132 Is, is it a case that you'd picked up this, a distress beacon, obviously you would notify somebody immediately that you had done that?

A Yep.

Q133 That someone should have been in a position to say to you that has been addressed?

A No. The, the range of the beacon is not great, there are a number of people in rafts out there, each would have been carrying a beacon on the same frequency, it could have been anyone.

Q134 Yeah, that's fine. Senior Constable Woods, at this time?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q135 Just to clarify on the weather conditions. You said it had subsided, are you able to elaborate on, on wind speed?

A I think the winds were probably down around 30 knots and the seas were probably down say, 10 metres, so, it was, just about half the conditions.

Q136 Was, was the winch used on your helicopter that day?

A Yes, it had been in the morning, the winch cutter was changed overnight and the night crew was despatched at 5 o'clock in the morning and they went and rescued five individuals from Midnight Express, I think it is.

Q137 But during the course of your - - -

A During my - - -

Q137 - - - flying time that day, was the winch used?

A No.

Q138 What time did you commence duties that day?

A We arrived at around 9.00, from memory, and the aircraft was not back at Merimbula when we arrived, it arrived at probably 9.30 and we took over about 10.00.

Q139 And stood down that day at -?

A Well, I flew the aircraft back and we landed at about 19.00 I think.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

You got anything else in relation to that day?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

No, nothing at all.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q140 Anything else, Ray, that you'd like to say in relation to what occurred that day?

A No,

Q141 All right. We move ahead now to the 29th of December, you've indicated earlier that you were involved in some way on that day?

A Yes. The aircraft was, we returned the aircraft to

Canberra it was, it was called back on to the, the rescue, or the search overnight, and so when I arrived at work, prior to arriving at work in the morning the acting base manager rang, informed me that I'd be flying down to Merimbula again and taking the aircraft from the night crew there. So, I headed down to Merimbula, we had George Casey was my crewman, I'm trying to remember who the paramedics were, I think Brad Hogan was one, I'd have to check

Q142 That's something we can look at, yeah.

A Unprepared for that one. And we spent the day again, flying, flying searches. The, we were looking for two individuals who'd been lost from a raft off the Winston Churchill.

Q143 All right. Can you take it further for me, what, how the day actually unfolded for you?

A The first part of the day, when we arrived I think an army aircraft was just bringing back the body of one or two deceased crew from the Winston Churchill. We attended a briefing at Merimbula and we were basically given our assignment for the day. We flew out, we were flying in the area that I gather the individual, individuals were picked up from. And we were just one of about three or four aircraft flying line searches in adjacent patches. We flew, I think we flew one pattern that day, and we were out there for two and a half hours. And we were en-route back to Merimbula and we got tasked for a rescue on land, and that was

basically the end of our involvement with the, the search.

Q144 All right. The weather, on this particular day?

A The weather was, was, the winds probably 10, 15 knots, the sea almost flat.

Q145 And, and the flying conditions?

A Perfect.

Q146 Yeah. Did your helicopter effect any actual rescues that day?

A No, not in connection with the Sydney to Hobart anyway.

Q147 Was, did you have any problems with your equipment at all that day, to your knowledge?

A No.

Q148 So what, what time were you stood down that day, do you, do you recall?

A Again, I flew back and I think I would have, think I was home about 19.00 again.

Q149 Did you see any yachts that day?

A I saw one coming in within about two miles of Merimbula, that was it.

Q150 Senior Constable Woods,

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Nothing on this, no.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q151 Was there anything that happened that day that you're aware of that would lead you to make a recommendation about how things might be done differently?

A No.

Q152 We, we asked you when we were speaking about the 27th of the 12th, did you have any fears during, during the time you were out there, this second and third day, did you have any fears to do with, related to what you were doing?

A None whatsoever.

Q153 You also, you also mentioned, I think we were talking about that last one, that the winch cable was replaced overnight, between one of the nights you mentioned earlier.

A Yeah.

Q154 Is that normal practice?

A No, we'd, we damaged the, we suspected that we damaged the, the winch cable, it had a little bit of, I dunno what the technical term for it is, but, it was slightly deformed within the last 20 feet of the, the winch cable. Which indicates there may be damage inside. So, the engineer, our engineer flew down that night and replaced the winch cable.

Q155 Just in relation to that, the winch, is it the case that more appropriate equipment could have been fitted, or it was just an unfortunate sort of incident with
- - -

A It was - - -

Q155 - - - equipment which was suitable for the task?

A It is, was, an unfortunate meeting of the, the raft and the winch cable, and if the raft hadn't been there it wouldn't have damaged the winch cable, simple as that.

Q156 O.K.

A So, as I said before, the raft was a liability throughout and if it hadn't been for the extremely quick thinking of the paramedic who just took a jay knife and cut the raft free, if she had tried to untangle it it could have been far more difficult than it was. So, no, there's, it was just unfortunate.

Q157 Could that have had fatal consequences, had she not taken that action?

A Of course, I mean we were in a situation where, where anyone could have died. You know, one of the, one of the paramedics took a blow to the head from the CO2 cylinder that inflates the raft, and that could easily have hit her in the face, for example. It, yeah, it was an extremely dangerous situation, there's no two ways about it.

Q158 So, just, just to summarise and I appreciate that we're rehashing, if you could make a recommendation out to improve things, a, as in a single recommendation, what would it be?

A The requirement to have survival gear that meets at least some, some higher minimum standard. For example, the, the individuals who went missing off the life raft, Winston Churchill, if they'd had vests fitted with locator beacons and strobes, you know, there's, at least they would have found their bodies, if not the, you know, the people still living in them.

Q159 All right. Anything else?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q160 Just one thing. Aside of yourself, the actions of your crew, especially on the 27th, is there any sort of recommendations or commendations you'd like noted with respect to them?

A They did a brilliant job. These two women had been on the helicopter since October, well, some of their training was in Lake Burly Griffin, and here we go out, we were flying around, you know, my crewmen spent 20 years in the navy and you know, he would have seen the ocean in, in just about every possible state that it can be in, and he was just saying, "Oh, God", and in the end they said, "Shut up", 'cause he was, he was basically frightening them. But they still went down. And they did a brilliant job. It was very much, you know, I sort of look at it, look at it like, we were, we were sent out to catch a mouse and we, we found ourselves with a tiger, you know, it was, it was far and away more than we expected to find. But, you know, so what.

Q161 And from your opinion of conditions and it was, what, heroic for these girls sort of being lowering themselves down - - -

A For them, definitely.

Q161 - - - in the conditions that were there?

A Definitely.

Q162 O.K.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q163 They, they probably wouldn't look at it like that, probably look at it that it was their, their job but obviously - - -

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q164 From your it was heroic?

A Yeah, it was, there's no two ways about it.

Q165 Nothing, further, no.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q166 All right. Is there anything, Ray, you'd like to say about any of the matters we've discussed?

A No, that's the most thorough questioning I've had on the subject since it occurred, so, unfortunately it's been a bit of a lag, some of the details are probably a little bit fuzzy.

Q167 Yeah, all right.

A You get the gist.

Q168 Yeah, all right. All right. The time is now 4.06pm, eastern standard time. This interview is completed.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED