

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Detective Senior Constable Stuart Gray and Adrian Walter, at Moorabbin Airport, Southern Air Services, on Thursday, the 1st of July, 1999. Also present seated to my right is Senior Constable David Upston from New South Wales Water Police. Time by my watch is now 10.00am. For the purpose of the record, Adrian, could you please state your full name?

A Adrian James Walter.

Q2 Your date of birth?

A 17th of March, 1967.

Q3 And your current address?

A House 1, 79 Northcliffe Road, Edithvale, Victoria, 3196.

Q4 And your occupation?

A Pilot in Southern Air Services.

Q5 O.K. Could you, before that, the reason I'm here today is I'm investigating the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race and I've been tasked to speak to various search and rescue authorities and that's why we're here to speak to you today, and in particular a, an incident where there was a possible misidentification of a, of a boat called the Winston Churchill.

A O.K.

Q6 So if you could just start with your flying experience?

A I've been flying for 16 years and I hold an Australian A.T.P.L.

Q7 And what's an A.T.P.L?

A It's an air transport pilot's licence, the highest licence classification in Australia.

Q8 O.K. And how long have you been employed with this firm?

A 6 years.

Q9 O.K. If I could take you back to the 27th of December, 1998, you might like to relay what happened that day?

A O.K. I was called in the afternoon at my home by Neil, he said, We've got a, a S.A.R. with a yacht off the coast of Mallacoota, could be up to 9 people in the water, and we were tasked to go and find the yacht and ..... whatever assistance we could. When I arrived at the airport I was given the name, ..... we were after the Winston Churchill.

Q10 Right.

A And that was about it. We were given a latitude and longitude and off we went. Arriving at the scene just over an hour and a half later, there was low cloud and a few drizzle patches and fairly severe seas. We arrived at the lat and long and we saw a yacht - - -

Q11 Right.

A - - - which we called the target, we didn't know if it was the Winston Churchill or not 'cause we weren't able to read the name due to the, the aircraft bouncing around and .....

Q12 Mmm.

A It was just a standard looking yacht, white hull with no mast and that was about all we could really identify at the time.

Q13 Mmm.

A As we didn't have a description of the Churchill at the time, we assumed that, well, this is the position we were given, that it possibly could be.

Q14 Yeah.

A But we wanted to be able to positively identify it, so that was that. From there we started receiving a Mayday call from Sword of Orion, I think there was another distress call from another yacht that had just been dismasted, and we tried getting in contact with a tanker which we'd seen ploughing through the seas just to the, the north of our position - - -

Q15 Yeah.

A - - - if he could render any assistance. Yeah. We got in contact with it and the vessel was called the Thor Sky, if I believe correctly, remember.

Q16 O.K. The yacht that you said called a Mayday which had just been dismasted, do you recall what yacht that was?

A We got a Mayday call from Sword of Orion on channel 16.

Q17 Yeah.

A The other yacht, there were various yachts out there, Kick 10 was another one that had just got into trouble.

Q18 Right.

A There was a call about the Business Post Naiad at the time saying they'd been rolled or something.

Q19 Right. Did you get any communications from the Naiad at all?

A No. We, it was very busy at the time. There was a lot of helicopters talkin' to each other - - -

Q20 Yeah.

A - - - there were helicopters talking to yachts, there were yachts talking to yachts, we were talking to yachts. We were trying to talk to the tanker. It was very hard to, to hear a lot of the time - - -

Q21 Yeah.

A - - - what was going on, on channel 16, there was people over-transmitting each other. The helicopters I think were in touch with Naiad at the time.

Q22 Right.

A I'm not 100 per cent sure, but I think it's what was happening.

Q23 O.K. We managed to contact Sword of Orion but only after we were basically over the top of it, and if we stayed over the top of it we could talk to it. But again, if we flew more than a couple of miles from it, we were unable to talk to it any more. There was another yacht, B-52, was in trouble. We only heard that on the radio. There was another fixed wing search plane and he was looking for that one.

Q24 Do you recall how many aircraft were in the air that day, on the 27th, approximately?

A Yeah, approximately there was three or four. There was Southrunner, the Chieftain we were in, there was an

Aerocommander and there was another fixed wing aircraft, I can't recall what type it was. I think it was a Cessna 400 Series or something from Canberra or something. I don't remember exactly. There was a lot of helicopters up by that stage, yeah, Southcare and Helimed and Polair was on its way. A couple of the Shark and Navy helicopters were inbound and winching it at the time, so the radios were a, a real clutter of -  
- -

Q25 Mmm.

A - - - a lot of inter-plane and helicopter communications and people trying to talk to ships and yachts and - - -

Q26 Yeah.

A - - - and there were lats and longs being read all over the place and reports of beacons going off, and we were homing in on beacons that, yeah, well, probably half a dozen beacons at a time radiating, so it was very hard to initially to determine which beacon was attached to which yacht and - - -

Q27 Mmm.

A - - - what yacht we were looking at as opposed to what we were hearing on the radio.

Q28 Yeah. So overall, so far as communications, other than congestion - - -

A Mmm.

Q28 - - - were you happy with communications?

A Um - - -

Q29            Could have been done better or is there - - -

A              Yeah. My own personal feeling is if they put a top cover aircraft in there from the, the moment that things had started to go bad - - -

Q30            Yeah.

A              - - - it might've been co-ordinated better. I think it would have eased a lot of the confusion as to who was supposed to be going where.

Q31            Mmm. That did eventuate, did it not?

A              Yeah, it did.

Q32            A top cover ..... next day.

A              The next day ..... top cover aircraft .. provided.

Q33            Right.

A              I'm not sure it would've had any, any change of events on the first day - - -

Q34            Yeah.

A              - - - but it might've helped at least ease some of the traffic and we could've concentrated more on, more on exactly who was reporting what, so we weren't just flying wildly over the sky, you know, chasing beacons and - - -

Q35            Mmm.

A              - - - and things like that.

Q36            Do you know why they wouldn't have put a top cover aircraft in on, on day one?

A              Not really sure, maybe they got caught a bit by, bit by surprise and they were - - -

Q37            Mmm.

A - - - caught with their pants down, so to speak, but other than that, no, not really.

Q38 And what was your position in the aircraft exactly?

A I was on the right hand seat, front right hand seat of the Chieftain.

Q39 Is that co-pilot?

A Yeah, co-pilot.

Q40 O.K. Now so far as general conditions, visibility and winds and that sort of, rain, how would you assess it all?

A O.K. When we first got there it was marginal. Base was anywhere between, in patches 1,000 feet down to 500 and there were drizzle patches around, but you were mostly able to navigate around those. The further out we got and as the day progressed, the cloud base came down to below 500 feet at times. The visibility was reduced to 2 or 3 kilometres, the winds were onwards of 60 knots. You got to the point where it just wasn't safe to try and weave in and out of the, out of the showers because we couldn't see where we were going.

Q41 Mmm.

A Identifying yachts was getting to be impossible because of the failing light, and then the sea state was just making flight below 500 feet dangerous.

Q42 Mmm.

A So yeah, it was a bit of a nightmare trying to fly the plane and look for people as well.

Q43           Yeah. And how many search and rescues have you been involved in, in your 16 years of flying?

A             I've been involved with S.A.R. for the 6 years I've been full time here, and I've probably been involved with 30 to 40 S.A.R's.

Q44           Mmm.

A             Something like that.

Q45           Is that the worst conditions you've been involved in?

A             Oh, I've probably been on one other S.A.R. which was similar, but yeah, it's up there with the worst I've seen, for sure.

Q46           Right. O.K. Now do you have any suggestions in relation to your identification for the future or any other suggestions that may assist your job?

A             I don't know, it's kind of hard, just with the yachts sitting like they do in the water at times. I don't know if larger lettering'd help. Maybe if they had a beacon on board and a morse code ..... that we could attach to the hull, something like that, maybe.

Q47           Mmm.

A             Or if we had a, a picture of what yacht we were looking for - - -

Q48           Yeah.

A             - - - at least ..... identify colourings and maybe the hull shape and size.

Q49           Mmm.

A             That might help. But other than that, yeah, it's pretty difficult in those sort of conditions.



Q50 And overall you were fairly happy with the way the aircraft operated in that environment?

A Yeah. Absolutely. All the gear on board was working correctly, the homer was indicating the beacons as it was designed to do. And we were in communication via channel 16 with some of the yachts, yeah, the crew and the, the radios and the equipment all work well, which was good.

Q51 Good.

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

Q52 With the communications that you had with Sword of Orion, that was on channel 16?

A That's right. Yeah, Angus was down the back talking to them and I was listening on the area frequency radio to see what other aircraft were around or helicopters that could provide assistance.

Q53 Is, is it the case, and just refresh my memory, that the communications on a lot of the yachts was non-existent because there was no, no radios on board the yachts that you're aware of?

A I don't think it was the fact that there weren't radios, it was the fact that it was busy and people had been over-transmitted, or there wasn't a long enough pause and a, between communications for someone to get a word in. And again it was difficult, at certain times we flew more than half a mile away from the yacht, we didn't have communications with it, because of the way it was pitching and rolling in the sea, we

weren't getting a clear signal, I guess. Yeah, it was difficult. I, I believe yachts were talking to each other, we could hear some yachts talking on channel 16, but it was difficult, sort of.

Q54           Yeah. O.K.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q55           Anything else you'd like to say?

A             No, that's about it.

Q56           O.K. Time by my watch now is 10 minutes past 10.00.  
This interview is concluded.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED