

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Detective Senior Constable Stuart Gray, and Mr Ed Psaltis at the Sydney Water Police Station on Friday, the 23rd of July, 1999. The time on my watch now is 4.43pm. For the purpose of the record, Ed, could you just please state your full name?

A Edward McDonald Psaltis.

Q2 Your date of birth?

A 7th of the 4th, 61.

Q3 Your current address?

A 48 Avian Crescent, Lane Cove.

Q4 And your occupation?

A Chartered accountant.

Q5 As I have already explained to you, I'm making inquiries in relation to the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, and with that I've had to interview a number of boats involved in the race, which were involved in incidents and in today's case I'm speaking to you as the winner of the 1998 Sydney to Hobart.

A That's correct.

Q6 Now, could you just give me some sailing experience, or your background to sailing?

A I've been sailing all my life. My father's always been heavily involved in ocean racing. He's done about, I think 19 Hobarts, I've done 17 Hobarts. So since I was, I suppose 2 years old I've been on yachts, offshore cruising and racing. As I say 17 Sydney

Hobarts and racing overseas in the Mediterranean, several Sydney/Mooloolooba races, Sydney Gold Coast races and other races up and down the east coast of Australia.

Q7 O.K. Now the boat which you entered in last year was called?

A A F R Midnight Rambler.

Q8 Can you tell me about that boat?

A It's a Robert Hick design, 35 foot sloop, designed and built in 1994. We purchased her in, around the 7th of December, '98, just before the '98 Hobart race.

Q9 O.K. And how many crew did you have on the boat for the race?

A Seven crew. Myself and six, so seven people in total.

Q10 O.K. Now so far as when you put your application form in with the crew list, the crew list that you submitted to the C.Y.C.A. for the race, was that in fact the crew that raced on the boat?

A Yes, that's right.

Q11 O.K. Now the stability index of your boat is?

A 123 - - -

Q12 O.K.

A - - - degrees.

Q13 And what division did you enter into last year?

A In the I.M.S. division, the, the grand prix handicap division of the race.

Q14 O.K. You might like to just explain to me, in fact, Sayonara crossed the line first, is that correct?

A Yeah. That's right.

Q15 Now, how was it that you become overall race winner?

A It's all based on a handicap, which is the I.M.S. system, the International Measurement System. Each boat gets a separate handicap, and the bigger boats get a higher handicap, the lower boats get a lower handicap, the idea being that everyone has a, an equal chance to win the race. It's a technical formula, quite a technical computer based formula using a high range of factors, length, breadth, weight, sail area, a whole lot of other technical factors go into this to determine how fast the boat should go and you race to your handicap rating.

Q16 Right. Now so, as far as the fleet of 115 boats and your boat being 35 foot, was that one of the smallest boats in the fleet?

A It was among the smaller. I think the smallest was 30 feet, so 35 is getting down there. It's, yes, it's on the, on the smaller end of the scale.

Q17 Right. Now the construction of the boat, is that fibreglass?

A G.R.P. construction, foam, sand, sandwich, fibreglass, fairly high, high tech fibreglass construction, yeah.

Q18 Right. Now although you purchased the boat on the 7th of December, what boat did you have prior to that?

A I had a boat also called Midnight Rambler, which we had, which we owned for 2 years, myself and my co-

owner, and we sold her and bought the, bought the new boat which we also called Midnight Rambler.

Q19 O.K. Now how much training as a team did you guys do prior to the race?

A We only owned the boat for 3 weeks which sounds like we sort of jumped on and went off without thinking about it, but that isn't the case because we have, the, the crew that we have have been together for many years, so half of us, at least half that crew have done the last nine Hobart race together on varying boats. So I think it's fair to say that we have a good understanding as a crew. We know each other very well, know our personalities very well and our strengths and weaknesses very well, which I think counted for a lot when the, when the going got tough. Training during that 3 week period was very intense. A lot of reefing the mains, putting the tri sail and storm sail up and down on, even though it was only on Sydney Harbour, we were going through the process of mechanically doing it so when the time came to put it up in 50 knots of breeze we at least knew where everything was. So I think it's fair to say that even though we bought the boat just before the race we had a crew that knew each other very well and we knew the boat pretty well by the time Boxing Day came around.

Q20 Right. Now as a result of the race was anybody injured on your boat?

A Yeah, there was one injury. One of our guys was down below during the height of the gale and he was thrown across the cabin and landed on the cabin side or the top of the cabin. And there was a bolt coming through. He landed and smashed his head into the bolt.

Q21 Right.

A Cut across his head, more like a graze, it wasn't a clean cut, it was a graze but quite a deep one. There was blood all over the place with that. He was, we believe he was concussed - - -

Q22 Yeah.

A - - - we think only mild concussion but he was concussed. He was put into his bunk for 6 hours, blankets put over him and after 6 hours we thought and, and he believed he was O.K. to come on, come on deck again.

Q23 O.K. Now so far as the 17 Hobarts that you've done, was last year's the worst that you can recall, so far as weather?

A In terms of how hard it blew it was the worst. I think it's fair to say yes, it's the worst Hobart I've done.

Q24 What would be the one closest to last year out of the ones you've done?

A The '93 race, which I didn't finish. We got half way through Bass Strait and then pulled out - - -

Q25 Right.

A - - - that was a bad race, and why I was hesitating before was because while in '93 it didn't blow as hard

and the conditions weren't as severe, it actually happened for longer.

Q26 Right.

A In the '93 race it blew for about 2 and a half days, I think - - -

Q27 Right.

A - - - on the nose, blowing very hard. So in terms of just punching into it day after day, and we didn't even finish, but that was a, a tough race. But this race I think was tougher because we had to experience harder, harder conditions for still about 8 hours of really tough stuff, and about 20 hours of moderately tough stuff.

Q28 Right. Now so far as life rafts, what type of life raft did you have on your, your boat?

A We've got a R.F.D. eight man life raft in a soft pack.

Q29 Right. Now did you guys attend a life rafting display at the C.Y.C. prior to the race?

A No.

Q30 Were you aware that there was a display?

A Yes, we were.

Q31 O.K. Has anybody of your, any of your crew ever deployed a life raft that you're aware of?

A Not that I'm aware of. Bob Thomas may've. He's on the, on the crew and he's a master mariner, so it's, he's, he's around ships all his life. He may have but not to my knowledge anyway.

Q32 O.K. Now if I could take you, rather than go through the, at the very start, perhaps I could take you to the 27th when things started to happen. You might like to take me through what you guys did and what you experienced.

A O.K. At around midday we were 20 miles into Bass Strait, 30 miles into Bass Strait roughly. One of the most windward boats of the fleet. We'd stayed in close to the coast on purpose because the, the forecast was south-west and we wanted to keep high, keep close. Close to the coast means you have the benefit. You can pull away once the sou-wester comes. We got the breeze. We, we got a very, the, the first of the really tough stuff at about midday. It came in very, very quickly and just kept blowing and blowing. With the breeze came torrential rain, very low clouds, dark black clouds, very low to the water. At about 50 knots we lost our, our off the top of the mast, it was all blown away and the breeze kept going higher and higher than what we had, what we were experiencing then. It stayed in very hard for 8 hours, til 8 o'clock at night, and then quite suddenly died off down to about 15 knots which we were amazed at, and the sun actually peeked through for probably an hour. We figured maybe it was the eye of the storm, maybe. I, I don't know but we, we sailed out of very tough stuff into sunshine and 15 knots. Then we sailed back into about 45 knots again for a further 12, maybe 10, 12

hours. So the worst of it for us was, was, was between 12.00 and 8.00 at night, when I think it was blowing, I estimate 70 knots.

Q33 Mmm.

A 65, 70 knots, very big waves and survival conditions. We weren't racing, we were surviving. The reason why I kept going south is that in our assessment that was the best way to survive. If we turned around, and run with the waves on a 35 footer in my opinion, we've have been rolled by the waves, 'cause they were very big waves coming through. So we thought the best way to survive these things was to keep going into them at an angle of about 60 degrees to, to the direction the waves were coming from, get over the top of them and keep going, keep trying to attack the waves, rather than let them attack you by running with them.

Q34 Mmm.

A Which in hindsight worked. We had, had a storm watch system happening, where we only had two on deck and five below. We were obviously all wearing life harnesses at, at this stage and the two on deck, one was a steerer, the, the other guy was facing the, the waves coming at us and he'd call wave, when, when a very big wave hit or was about to come.

Q35 Mmm.

A The steerer would size it up and try to steer over that wave, because every wave required a, a different method of taking it on. They were all different in size and

shape and you had to size up exactly what it was doing and then alter your course, tailor your course for every individual wave. Steerers were only steering for 1 hour, maybe 1 and a half hour max, but we kept revolving our two principal steerer around, then a third guy was coming into assist once those two guys got a bit tired. Before the storm hit we were, we were hearing of big winds coming, you know, we, we got a forecast. I think the forecast was 55 knots and even that is a lot of breeze. Our navigator, Bob Thomas, he's a master mariner, got the panic box out, well it was already available but made it more available and the, and the panic, panic box's waterproof container of you know, flares and torches and other - - -

Q36 Right.

A - - - emergency gear that we need, let the crew know where it was, discussed procedures of pulling out the life raft and what would happen if something seriously goes wrong, so he tried to go through as, as much as he can in safety procedures that we may have to employ if, if something went wrong. We had the life harnesses out, we all put life harnesses on before the, before the storm hit and used those throughout the, the race and put the storm boards in the, in the hatches, got the storm sail and storm jib out of there compartments and had them sitting right near the companionway so they could be accessed very quickly. So we, we tried

to do as much as we could to prepare ourselves for the worst before that 12 o'clock - - -

A Mmm.

Q36 - - - deadline hit. After it was over at 8 o'clock we sort of sat around for half an hour licking our wounds and wondering what the hell had happened to us and thankful that we were still there and we, we got through it. We gradually put some sail back up again. We only had a storm sail up during the, the 8 hours, just the one tiny storm sail, nothing else, gradually set the main sail fully reefed and kept going into it again for a further 12 hours, roughly 12 hours at, blowing between, probably 35 and 45 knots and then it gradually abated and we, we were down towards the coast of Tasmania by then. So that's, that's all that I can - - -

Q37 Mmm.

A Radio communications. We heard on the sched, I think it was a 2 o'clock sched in the afternoon of the 27th, Sword of Orion, when she was getting her lat and long set after she finished. By the way and we got 78 knots happening here, and that wasn't forecast and that gave us a scare.

Q38 So was she in front of your at that stage?

A Yes, yes, she was still racing. She was a bigger boat, so she - - -

Q39 Right.

A - - - she'd have been in front of us at that stage. I think, yeah, I think she was still racing. I think she pulled out after that. So we heard that, apart from that we didn't hear much of anything else. The radio was coming in and out. Most of our electrics were full of water, they all packed in. We didn't have any boat speed. Nothing was, the G.P.S. the satellite navigation system was full of water, that packed it in. So for a while we had just the compass to steer by.

Q40 So you had a fair bit of water go into the boat?

A Yes, yeah. Not to the point where we were going to sink, but every time the hatch was opened up

Q41 Yeah.

A - - - the, the waves were such that you'd get gallons of water down below.

Q42 So how deep was she at some points?

A Leaning over, so the bilge was dry but down the bottom gunwale of the boat oh, probably 6 inches to 1 foot of water down there.

Q43 Right.

A It wasn't a serious problem but we had to bail pretty regularly just to keep that out of there. But because we were jumping around all over the place the, the water was just, it's hard to describe but in those conditions everything gets wet down below, nothing is saved. Everything was saturated down below, including our electrics. Hence we lost most of our gear. The

radio was working but it was a bit dickie. It was, you know, coming in and out.

Q44 Oh, right. Do you guys have a, any hand held radios at all?

A No. We've got a V.H.F. and a H.F. radio but no hand helds.

Q45 No hand helds. Now, in relation to the harnesses, the harnesses that are on your boat, do you have your own harnesses on the boat, so to speak?

A We have seven harnesses that we carry aboard for safety compliance - - -

Q46 Yeah.

A - - - but some of the crew prefer to use their own inbuilt like - - -

Q47 Right.

A - - - wet weather gear harnesses. If that's the case we just undo the lanyard from the boat's harness, give them the lanyard and they use their own - - -

Q48 Right.

A - - - internal harness. Others prefer to use the, the full harness - - -

Q49 Right.

A - - - so they can, they can use that.

Q50 Now the harnesses, when I say, the lanyards on your boat, are they a 2-2-2-7, Australian safety standard?

A Oh, I believe they are. I'd have to check that. I, I, I, I think they are.

Q51 Right.

A They were, they were passed in safety, so - - -

Q52 Do you know what brand they are offhand?

A Not offhand.

Q53 That's fine. That's fine.

A No.

Q54 Now in relation to the wave heights, can you give an estimation on some of the waves, as far as height's concerned?

A Yeah. It's pretty hard to estimate. They, they were certainly monsters.

Q55 Yeah.

A I was looking up at them. I'm told there were 60 foot waves, some bigger than 60 feet. I, I can believe there were some 60 foot waves coming through, 'cause they were certainly, it, it wasn't looking straight up because a wave has a gradual, you know, build to get to the crest, but the top of the crest, from the bottom of the trough to the bottom of the, to the top of the crest would have been 60 feet, possibly more in some cases.

Q56 Yeah.

A And the top 10 feet of those is breaking white water, so the real nasty ones were monsters and the worst thing was they, they weren't just the usual Bass Strait roller, which can be monsters but you go up and down them relatively easily, these were nasty growling waves that were breaking on you, and it was, it was the breaking white water that was the main problem.

Q57 Yeah.

A They had the potential to knock you off your course, course, turn you and roll you.

Q58 Yeah. Yeah. Now so far as the, the information the weather bureau supplied after the race in relation to wind speeds and wave heights, if you, they indicated that you could add 40 per cent to winds and you could add 87 per cent to waves. You as a sailor, in your, all of your years of experience have you ever heard that formula before?

A I haven't heard of any official formula like that however I must say that we've grown to be very cynical of weather forecasts over the years so we've worked out our own formula - - -

Q59 Mmm.

A - - - which comes out not in terms of waves, but certainly in terms of breeze. We've regularly heard in Hobart races it's going to blow 25 to 30 and we laugh and say that means, you know, 45 - - -

Q60 Right.

A - - - knots. And that's what they have effectively said - - -

Q61 Said.

A - - - is the official case, so unofficially through experience we've learnt to add a lot more on to what has has been forecast - - -

Q62 Mmm.

A - - - wind wise. So when we heard the 55 knots we said well potentially, from our experience, that could be a fair bit more.

Q63 Mmm.

A In the gusts.

Q64 Now did any of your crew have personal E.P.I.R.B.'s at all?

A No.

Q65 O.K.

A Although I must say we are looking at, most if not all of us will start, will be using those for future ocean races.

Q66 Right.

A We'll just buy them and put them in our - - -

Q67 Yeah.

A - - - wet weather gear.

Q68 Yeah. O.K. What are your views in relation to the radio being left on 24 hours a day?

A Oh - - -

Q69

A I've got no problem with that, because radios don't take up, they take some battery power but they, they only really suck the battery power out when you, when you're transmitting.

Q70 Right.

A To have, have the radio on, there's a, there's a battery concern, it will chew up some battery power - -

-

Q71 Yeah.

A - - - but I've got, I've got no problem in doing that. I think the thing with us during the storm, there was no one sitting around listening to a radio, we were, we were surviving, you know - - -

Q72 Yeah.

A - - - it's, it's hard to explain but even if the radio had been working all the time I couldn't even guarantee that we'd have heard it - - -

Q73 Yeah.

A - - - 'cause we were just too busy literally surviving.

Q74 The only reason I asked that is because a lot of people have told us previously that they have their radios off and sort of turn their radios on for, for scheds. So you know there's some time between those scheds and if it was a, a nice race so to speak weather wise - - -

A Yeah.

Q74 - - - you had your radio off there could be things that you could miss, that's the only reason - - -

A That's true.

Q74 - - - I, I say that.

A Yeah. That's true and, and we are guilty of that as well. We, we don't, sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. It just depends on - - -

Q75 Mmm.

A - - - circumstances, battery power - - -

Q76 Yeah.

A - - - whether we're concerned about what's coming up, you know, 'cause we, we try to watch the weather of course. Having said that we, we don't just turn, we don't just listen to the scheds, there's regular coastal forecasts and there's even a comms forecast and we make sure we, we get all those.

Q77 Yeah.

A And if you catch all those you got, not a continuous update, but you've, you got pretty regular intervals of weather updates that you can get onto. Even just the local AM/FM radio stations down the coast - - -

Q78 Yeah.

A - - - give you, you know, can give you some indication of weather.

Q79 Did you, did you guys hear the storm warning issued at 14.00 on the 26th?

A I can't say that I did. I, I wasn't, I wasn't the radio man, the navigator's Bob Thomas.

Q80 Would he have brought that to your attention if he'd heard anything?

A Yeah, look I, I, I can, I can recollect him saying, We've got some serious shit happening here, or - - -

Q81 Right.

A - - - words to that effect. But I, I, he, I don't know that he actually said there's a storm warning.

Q82 Yeah.

A What he told me was enough to indicate that there was, it was going to blow so - - -

Q83 Yeah.

A - - - I s'pose the message got across.

Q84 Yeah.

A I don't think he actually literally said, We've just had a storm warning.

Q85 Right.

A No.

Q86 O.K. Is there anything, any views or ideas that you have for the future so far as the Sydney to Hobart, that you'd like to sort of place on record?

A I, I like the look of these personal life vests that you can inflate inside your jacket.

Q87 Yeah.

A 'Cause no one's going to wear a bulky life jacket on a, a racing boat. The practicality is you just won't wear it because you can't move around and race, do your functions with that on.

Q88 Mmm.

A So this other thing you can wear doubles as, as warmth, 'cause it's, it's, it's a thermal jacket, various brands are selling these things and when you hit the water it's got a valve that inflates the life jacket.

Q89 Mmm.

A So that to me is something that is user friendly so people will actually use the damn things. And if you get into strife you haven't got to go and find your life jacket, you're already, already wearing it. So that's just something that I'm, I'm going to buy

personally. The personal E.P.I.R.B.'s while I said we're all going to get them I, I think what's even more important than a personal E.P.I.R.B. is a personal strobe light.

Q90 Mmm.

A 'Cause the, if, the E.P.I.R.B. means someone may come and find you in 2 or 3 or 4 hours and by that time you, you, you may be dead anyway.

Q91 Mmm.

A What's most important is for the boat that you've fallen off to find you so I think a personal strobe light is essential, so the boat can find you, then you're only in, in the water for, you know, 10 to 15 minutes. Now maybe the E.P.I.R.B. is a, is a good thing as well.

Q92

A I'm not saying it's a bad thing but I'm saying what's more important would be in my opinion is that each member of the, of the crew has a personal strobe light for if he goes over the side.

Q93 Uh-huh. What sort of E.P.I.R.B. have you got on board?

A It's not the one that I, I - - -

Q94 Is it a 121.5 - - -

A I think it is.

Q94 - - - decibel?

A It's, it's not, not the one that has personal identification facilities.

Q95 Yeah. That's the 121.5. In fact the one that has the personal stamped is a 4-0-6.

A Yeah. The, the, the 4-0-6 I don't have - - -

Q96 Yeah.

A - - - I, I must have the 1-2-1.

Q97 Yeah.

A It's, it's, it was a standard E.P.I.R.B. - - -

Q98 Yeah.

A - - - that has been in place for many years.

Q99 Have

A I think it's still G.P.S. compatible but it's not - -
-

Q100 Yeah. Have you considered the 4-0-6 at all?

A I think it's been made mandatory now anyway by the club.

Q101 Right.

A Their report on the Hobart said that you must have one so I, I have no choice but to buy one now anyway - - -

Q102 Mmm.

A - - - for future ocean races. Which I think is, I mean this is all cost and that. As a boat owner I'm thinking here we go, more costs, but how much is a life worth, so - - -

Q103 O.K.

A - - - if it's to increase safety then it's a good thing.

Q104 And certainly the lives of searching as well and all that sort of thing when you look at the whole thing, I suppose.

A Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

Q105 O.K. Now in, in relation to the weather again, if I just touch on that for a second. Did you, did you guys attend the bureau weather thing at the C.Y.C.A?

A This is just before the start of the race?

Q106 Before the race, yeah.

A Yeah, we did.

Q107 O.K. You didn't utilise someone like Roger Bannerman to give you independent weather advice?

A Not special advice. There, there was a briefing available to all entrants on Boxing Day and my navigator and co-owner, Bob Thomas, went to that.

Q108 Right.

A And that gave us, he came back to the boat and said something like, Forget the forecasts you've been hearing, this is not going to be an easy race, it's going to be a very tough race.

Q109 Who told you that?

A Bob Thomas told me.

Q110 Right. O.K. Yeah. Yeah.

A And he'd been to the publicly available - - -

Q111 Yeah.

A - - - briefing as opposed to I, I believe some boats paid for the service of experts to come and talk to them. We just got the publicly available one - - -

Q112 Yeah.

A - - - and it was made pretty clear to us that circumstances have changed and it was going to be a pretty tough blow. But no, we, we didn't use Bannerman or any of those guys on the, on the morning of the race, specifically anyway.

Q113 Yeah. O.K.

A Yeah.

Q114 Anything else you want to tell me?

A I've been thinking a bit about the life raft proposition.

Q115 Yeah.

A We've got a life raft down below. I know some are saying that's not good that, that it should be on deck.

Q116 Well, how, how heavy is the life raft down below?

A It's less than 40 K's.

Q117 It's in the valise, is it?

A Yes, yeah. My feeling is there, it's right next to the companionway - - -

Q118 Mmm.

A - - - it's tied down with a, a quick release knot. The cord is tied down to the same u bolt, so somebody could jump down or come up from down below and carry it up with them. I, I don't, what, what I'm saying is that we, we, we make sure there were no sails thrown over the top of it. This thing is always - - -

Q119 Right.

A - - - sitting there. Here's the stairs, there's the life raft right there, it's safe and secure. I see that as being no harder to get than something that's tied down up near the mast or down the back of the cockpit. What if we invert? That's the, that's the story. If, if we invert how can you get it if it's inside the boat? My feeling is there is that if you invert and you've got a life raft tied underneath the boat, you've got to dive and hold your breath and try to undo this thing. If the life raft is inside the boat that's not exactly much fun either, but at least you got air pockets in there - - -

Q120 Yeah.

A - - - to get, someone that's down below can be breathing while he's pulling the life raft out. Either way it's a, it's a pretty horrendous proposition, but what I'm saying is that I'm, I'm not convinced that having it on deck is going to make it any easier to get to even if you, even if you invert.

Q121 Mmm.

A So I'm a proponent for leaving them down below. Obviously it makes the boat faster for facing, but I, I'm, I'm leaving the racing angle out of it. Just from a safety point of view I, I wouldn't see it being any, any safer for our boat to have it tied somewhere up on deck than where it is down below. As long as it's not thrown underneath 10 sails.

Q122 Mmm.

A It's got to be available right, right near the stairs where you, you go down. Personal view.

Q123 Anything else?

A I'm just trying to think if there's anything that could help you. I, I, I, I think it's fair to say that without blowing our own trumpet too much, having crew combinations was really important when, when, when the shit hit the fan and the going got very tough.

Q124 Yeah.

A Having people who were, who were mates and who you knew the capabilities of, intimately, helped a lot.

Q125 Mmm.

A And some of the boats, I'm just surmising here, may have had some very good individual sailors on board but not good combinations on board and I think what got us through was more the, the combination than any one person's individual talent.

Q126 Yeah.

A So what I'm getting at here is that before you go to Hobart you should have a crew that mightn't be super stars but they at least have sailed together a lot and know each other very well.

Q127 How many Hobarts did you have on your boat?

A 51 Hobarts, most of those were done together - - -

Q128 Yeah.

A - - - with seven crew.

Q129 Yeah. It's a very important point that.

A Yeah.

Q130 O.K.

A That all right?

Q131 That's it. Time on my watch is 5.09. This interview
is concluded.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED