

STATEMENT BY JOHN YOUNG

Statement made on 20 July 00 at Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory by John Young in respect of the initial search and rescue action for survivors of the sunken yacht *Winston Churchill* on 27-28 December 1998.

My name is John Young and I reside at 66 William Wilkins Crescent, Isaacs, ACT, 2607. I am employed by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) in Canberra as the Operations Manager of the Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC), responsible for the conduct of maritime and aviation search and rescue operations in accordance with International and Australian SAR agreements. I joined AMSA in May 1998 as the Analysis Officer, responsible for post-incident analysis of search and rescue operations. I was acting in that capacity while in the RCC overnight 27-28 December 1998 and in some analytical work I subsequently performed for AMSA regarding Sydney-Hobart operations. I was appointed to my current position in March 1999. Before joining AMSA I was a seaman officer and Principal Warfare Officer in the Royal Australian Navy for 31 years.

Although I was present in the RCC during the period covered by this statement, I was not actively involved in decision-making. My statement is based on post-incident analysis of AusSAR files and telephone records to establish relevant facts.

On 27 December 1998 at 0622 UTC [5.22 p.m. local time] Mr Gary Ticehurst, the pilot of an ABC helicopter (VH-NTV), advised the Australian Search and Rescue Coordination Centre (AusSAR) that he had received a distress message from the yacht *Winston Churchill*. The distress message said that *Winston Churchill* was sinking rapidly in a position 20 miles south-east of Twofold Bay (Eden, NSW) and that the crew were abandoning the vessel into liferafts. AusSAR advised VH-NTV of an intention to send the *Southcare* helicopter to the scene.

At the same time, the crew of a fixed wing aircraft (VH-SAR) tasked by AusSAR earlier in the afternoon to home on a distress beacon relayed *Winston Churchill's* distress message to another AusSAR officer and advised that he would attend *Winston Churchill*.

Between 0626 UTC and 0638 UTC AusSAR attempted to contact the Southcare helicopter (VH-NSC) to respond to *Winston Churchill*, but Southcare was temporarily out of contact having been sent to refuel at Merimbula. The only other rescue helicopter in the area at that time was *Helimed 1* (VH-NSP) which was already committed to another known distressed yacht, *Stand Aside*.

A distress broadcast notifying shipping of *Winston Churchill* was issued at 0633 UTC. In this broadcast the initial distress position "20 miles south-east of Twofold Bay" was converted into a latitude and longitude search position for ease of reference by ships and aircraft. The converted position was 37 14 South 150 19 East (Position A hereafter for the purposes of this statement).

At 0644 UTC *Young Endeavour* advised that the vessel was enroute to *Stand Aside* but now intended to change course for *Winston Churchill*. At 0646 UTC AusSAR agreed with that intention and requested *Young Endeavour* to proceed to Position A.

At about the same time *Helimed 1* began winching the first of 12 survivors from *Stand Aside*.

At 0652 UTC AusSAR contacted the fixed wing aircraft VH-ILM on the ground at Merimbula and tasked the aircraft to search for *Winston Churchill* or liferafts in the vicinity of Position A.

At 0655 UTC Melbourne Flight Service advised AusSAR that the aircraft VH-SAR was overhead a yacht in distress in position 37 46 South 150 33 East (Position B) and that there were still people on board (based on information reported through AirServices Australia's aeronautical communications).

At 0657 UTC AusSAR was contacted by VH-SAR directly. The aircraft advised that it was overhead a vessel in position 37 46 South 150 33 East (Position B) believed to be the *Winston Churchill*. The vessel was in distress, with no mast and people were on the deck. VH-SAR noted that there was apparently a rescue boat on the way.

The AusSAR officer acknowledged the information and requested the aircraft to confirm that the yacht was definitely the *Winston Churchill*. VH-SAR responded "Affirm" (Yes.) In response to further questioning the aircraft advised that it looked like the yacht would remain afloat. This was acknowledged and AusSAR directed VH-SAR to remain overhead the yacht pending the arrival of a helicopter at about 0745 to 0750 UTC.

At 0657 UTC *Helimed 1* departed *Stand Aside* with 8 survivors, leaving 4 still to be rescued. The *Southcare* helicopter then undertook this task.

Effectively from 0657 UTC the *Winston Churchill* operation was progressively shifted from a search for liferafts near Position A towards a winch rescue from a floating yacht at Position B.

At 0705 UTC Melbourne Flight Service was asked to communicate with VH-ILM, tasked at 0652 UTC with searching for *Winston Churchill*, to conduct a wider search for distressed yachts north of 3730 South. The rationale for this decision was that all the other fixed wing aircraft were now holding over yachts and AusSAR desired to identify further problems in the remaining daylight. AusSAR records do not indicate exactly how long VH-ILM spent searching for liferafts 20 miles south-east of Twofold Bay before the revised tasking reached it. Officers on shift at the time recall the aircraft was there for about 40 minutes.

In the hours following the tasking of VH-ILM AusSAR made continuous efforts to relocate the yacht still believed to be *Winston Churchill* and rescue survivors. *Young Endeavour* was proceeding to Position B. At 0836 UTC the *Lifesaver 3* helicopter (VH-SLS) was tasked to search in the vicinity of Position B assisted later by *Helimed 1* which was tasked at 0909 UTC. At 0906 UTC the ship *Patsy N*, alerted by AusSAR's distress broadcast, passed through the area but reported making no sightings.

However, aviation weather conditions also influenced the effort, along with competing demands from other distress events. *Sword of Orion* absorbed substantial effort. VH-SAR was at one time driven off the scene by adverse weather.

At 1205 UTC an AusSAR officer again spoke with Garry Ticehurst (VH-NTV) to confirm the distress message received from *Winston Churchill*. Mr Ticehurst confirmed the original wording of the distress message and indicated that he had communicated personally with *Winston Churchill* briefly, but had to leave the scene to refuel.

At 1212 UTC AusSAR spoke with Mr. Neil Boag aboard VH-SAR, enroute to Moorabbin, to confirm the information relating to Position B. Mr. Boag confirmed that the position was 37 46 South 150 33 East. However, when questioned about identification of the yacht he advised that VH-SAR had not been able to get low enough to identify the yacht positively and was unable to communicate with it.

Based on the information from Mr. Ticehurst and Mr. Boag AusSAR concluded that the yacht reported at Position B at 0657 UTC had not been *Winston Churchill*. The search was then re-oriented to a search for survivors in liferafts in the vicinity of Position A.