

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Detective Senior Constable Walpole and Michelle Blewitt at the Queanbeyan Police Station on Saturday, the 5th of June, 1999. Also present is Senior Constable Woods. The time on my watch is 1.27pm, eastern standard time. Michelle, Senior Constable Woods and I are inquiring into your involvement in rescue operations carried out during the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. Do you understand that?

A Yes.

Q2 I intend to ask you some questions concerning your involvement. Those questions will be electronically recorded on three audio tapes as our interview takes place. Do you understand that?

A I do.

Q3 At the completion of the interview you will be given a copy of the interview in the form of an audio cassette. Do you understand that?

A Yes.

Q4 For the record, could you please state your full name?

A Michelle Marie Blewitt.

Q5 Can you tell me your date of birth?

A 14th of the 10th, 1968.

Q6 Can you tell me your current address?

A Wollondilly, Crookwell Road via Goulburn.

Q7 And can you tell me your occupation?

A I'm a paramedic with the ACT Ambulance Service.

Q8 Can you tell me how long you've held that position?

A I've been a paramedic for the last seven years. Prior to that I did my four years training to become a paramedic.

Q9 And where do you work from?

A I work within the ACT Ambulance Service. I also work on the Southcare Helicopter. Currently, I work out of Fyshwick Station but that's apt to change. I can work from any station within the ACT Ambulance Station Service.

Q10 Can you give me some details concerning your qualifications?

A I did a three year course and received a diploma in Applied Science and, which qualified me as a paramedic prior to commencing on Southcare. I also did another course in aero-medical training which involved the medical side and also learning the operational winching techniques, safety standards, et cetera, that go with the helicopter and paramedical medicines.

Q11 Can you tell me who Southcare is or are, what Southcare is?

A Southcare is an aero-medical rescue retrieval helicopter set up within the ACT, based in the ACT. It's set up between New South Wales and the ACT and as far I understand it, it's a company that set up, has a company arm which is also a charity arm and the ACT Ambulance Service is contracted to work for, the Southcare helicopter works for paramedics, they're

contracted to work, the Southcare helicopter.

Q12 All right. Now, just before the machine went on, we, we discussed some dates that you believe you were involved in rescue operations in, in the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race 1998, is that right?

A Yes.

Q13 That we discussed some dates?

A Yes, we did discuss dates.

Q14 Specifically, you mentioned to us the 27th of December, 1998, and the 28th of December, 1998. Is that correct?

A That's right.

Q15 Can you tell me as best as you can remember, what occurred involving yourself on the 27th of December, 1998?

A I commenced a shift at 8 o'clock in the morning on the 27th of December, 1998. At approximately 8.30 we were missioned out to a patient with a spinal injury down to the area of Vincentia, just down the north coast, near Jervis Bay.

Q16 The south coast?

A Yes, sorry.

Q17 All right.

A Sort of north, it's getting that way. Anyway, down the south coast, yes. We went down, we retrieved that patient, we flew that patient to, we stabilised him and flew him to Royal North Shore, unloaded. We then did some paperwork, flew on to Mascot Airport and refuelled the helicopter. On our way back from Mascot,

proceeding back to Canberra, our Canberra base, we were put on stand-by for another mission, but then we were stood down 'cause another helicopter went to that. And then we were notified that we were, we were possibly being missioned out to a job off Gabo Island to some yachts, to a yacht in distress. That was further confirmed that, yes, we were actually, were going. While we were still in the air, we were told that we need to go back to our Canberra base, where we were to do, get our gear together, get some fuel in the helicopter, our pilot was going to submit a flight plan and basically, we were going to be heading off to a place called Mallacoota to a yacht rescue. Well, actually to back up Helimed was our final bit of information. And Helimed is another, another helicopter service that operates out of Victoria.

Q18 Do you, do you recall what time or can you give me some approximation of time that you were directed to Mallacoota?

A I'm not, I wouldn't be a hundred percent sure. It was in the afternoon, I think around 3.30, 4 o'clock. I mean, I just, I couldn't, I didn't keep any documentation of times.

Q19 I, I appreciate that.

A And we didn't fill a case sheet in as such because of the, the way things turned out.

Q20 Can you tell me who, who the crew was on this particular day in relation to, to your helicopter?

A Yeah. We had one pilot on board who was Ray Stone. We had a crewman who was Mark Delf and another paramedic by the name of Kristy McAlister and there was also myself on the crew.

Q21 And can you tell me what, when, when you were on the south, the Southcare helicopter, what your specific role is and what is expected of you as a paramedic on the Southcare helicopter?

A That's a very open question. It depends on what sort of mission that you are missioned out to.

Q22 Well, in relation, all right, in relation to this mission to do with the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race.

A Well, initially, like I said, we were told our, initially our information was very scant on the, of what was expected of us. We were told that we were heading to Mallacoota to back up Helimed, that was basically our information, we were told to pack our winching gear and some, some mention of a winching bucket which we don't actually carry a winching bucket and the winching gear, the winch is apparently connected to the helicopter. It probably wasn't till we were flying out from Canberra and we were on our to Mallacoota that we were diverted to a place called Merimbula to refuel the helicopter, which we did. We did what's known as a hot refuel and it was probably about that time that we were made aware that we were going out to back-up Helimed to winch people off a yacht as a yacht was in distress, sinking. So our role

that day was basically to be winched down to winch people off a yacht that were in trouble.

Q23 And obviously to provide medical attention as required?

A To, yeah, yeah. To provide, yeah.

Q24 Do, do you recall whether you were, you, and when I say, you, the crew were tasked in relation to a specific yacht that day? If you don't remember - - -

A I don't, no. I mean I know the yacht that I winched on but I can't remember - - -

Q25 The name?

A I know, yeah, I know the name of the yacht that we winched off, we winched off the yacht Stand Aside, I don't know whether, I would suggest strongly that our pilot would have been told a name of the yacht because he would have had to track a yacht and track a helicopter to get to the location.

Q26 All right. Can you take me forward, take, well, move, move forward now to when youse moved into rescue mode, as in flew off the mainland - - -

A M'mm.

Q26 - - - heading out to the particular yacht that you'd been tasked in relation to, tell me what happened?

A Um -

Q27 As best you can recall.

A When we did the hot refuel at Merimbula, Kristy and I got into our wet, our wetsuit gear and we then proceeded from Merimbula out to the Stand Aside. There was a brief discussion between us and our crewman about

what was going to happen, maybe, what, whether we were going to winching, basically from a yacht or from, from the water.

Q28 Yeah.

A It probably wasn't until we got over the water that we realised it would be very difficult to be actually winching from the yacht. And basically not a lot else, we headed out and, to the Stand Aside.

Q29 All right. What, what were your initial observations of the yacht when you saw it for the first time?

A Um -

Q30 People on board, the state of the yacht, those sorts of things.

A I'm not really that good with yachts, I would have to say. I don't remember there being a mast on the yacht, a tall mast.

Q31 Yeah.

A Like I said, I haven't been around yachts so I don't, there was a life raft tethered out of the back of the yacht. There was another helicopter in situ and that person on the, was on the wire, on the helicopter attempting to rescue people out of the life raft and there were also still people standing to the rear of the yacht, on the Stand Aside. And a lot of them were in an orange coloured suit.

Q32 Can you remember how many people were still on the boat, on the yacht itself?

A No, not - - -

Q33 If you can't there's no dramas.

A No. No, I have no idea.

Q34 What about in, in the raft?

A Let me think. I couldn't say for sure how many there were in the raft, I would say from memory, about three to four, but I couldn't be exact on those figures.

Q35 Do you recall what other helicopter was there at the scene, you mentioned there was one there?

A Yeah, the other helicopter at the scene was Helimed 1, which comes from LaTrobe, Victoria.

Q36 O.K. All right. Can you explain to me the difference, if any, between rescuing off a yacht or, and out of the water, rescuing out of the water?

A To rescue off a yacht in the conditions of that day would have been more difficult than to rescue directly out the water, basically because of the obstacles that a yacht poses with entanglement. So once your winch cable gets tangled on a yacht, which is a large heavy object, it will lurch and pull a helicopter into the sea. Whereas if you're winching directly out of the water you don't have all your peripheral objects around you.

Q37 Absolutely. Right. So can you take me, take me further now, what, what actually happened out there, in relation to the, to the rescue of people from that yacht?

A We got to the site, and as I said Helimed was still in the process of winching a person off the life raft. I

heard our pilot inform the Helimed pilot that we were there. And he said something like he was just warming to the task. We then did like, closed little circuits in the helicopter waiting for the go ahead off Helimed to say that they were finished and that we could go in. While we were there Helimed winched a further two to three, I'm pretty sure it was three people off the yacht. Then they told us that they had, I think, I can't remember, they'd winched eight survivors, eight patients, survivors, whatever you call, and there was four remaining and we were, we were to pick up the last four surviving survivors.

Q38 All right. Can you take me now from the point where, where Helimed has finished doing what they're doing and then, and what, what you and your people did?

A Kristy was actually the first paramedic to be winched down out of Southcare, so, basically she did, she had her harness and all that sort of stuff on, our crewman got in the back and he has winch checks to do and blah, blah, blah, so he's done all that sort of stuff. Kristy's connected up to the winch hook with the strop and she's gone out of the aircraft down to winch up the survivors from a life raft at this stage.

Q39 All right. And how did that go?

A I actually can't really comment on that because I didn't watch, I was, had other things on my mind at that time.

Q40 All right. Can you tell me what, what you mean by the

term, "strop", what is that?

A A strop is a piece of equipment that we use, it's a large, looks like a horse U-shaped thing that goes, it's used to lift a survivor out of the water, it goes over the patient's head and under their arms and then it's connected to the winch cable and you and it helps lift the person up out of the water.

Q41 All right. Do you know whether Kristy had success on this first try when she, when it went down the first time?

A She eventually brought a patient up so she did have some success. I believe that she encountered some problems down there.

Q42 But you didn't see those problems?

A I didn't see those problems because I had my head in a vomit bowl at that stage. All right. It was actually air sick.

Q43 Air sick.

A Yeah. And I think the old adrenalin rush as well.

Q44 Absolutely. All right. So, well she'll obviously be able to elaborate on problems or otherwise that she might have had.

A M'mm.

Q45 Did, did she go back down a second time?

A She went back down a second time and brought up a second survivor.

Q46 And did you have any more luck with seeing what may or may not have happened on that second - - -

A No, no, no. And at that stage it was a personal decision I had chosen not to watch what Kristy was doing. When she came up the first time she'd said that she had a few problems and I knew that I would be going down and I didn't wanna have any pre-conceived ideas about what I was going to go down into. I mean I could see what the weather was like, I knew what that was going to be like, but when we first got there and we were watching the Helimed paramedic winch, and seeing him being thrown through the water and that sort of thing, thought it was, that was just the way I did it
- - -

Q47 Yeah.

A - - - I didn't wanna see what was, what was happening. I knew I had to go down there and do it.

Q48 Are you able to say, just back in relation to the first time she went down, how long she was down before she came back up, any idea?

A All I can say is that her first winch took longer than her second winch. In relationship to time, like I said, I'm not very good at the time, it, I dunno, it felt like hours, but it could have been 10 minutes, but I do know her first winch took a lot longer than her second winch.

Q49 Notwithstanding the, obviously the weather at the time, was it still daylight hours at the time?

A Yeah, it was still daylight hours but visibility was really poor, it was, it was very grey and there was a

lot of, like wind and rain squalls that came through which even decreased your visibility further. Probably when we first got there was our best visibility, and it just got, it just kept getting worse. Every time you seemed to stick your head out the door it was a little bit greyer and wetter.

Q50 So, bearing in mind the difficulties you were having and the, and the choices you'd made in relation to watching, or, watching was happening, are you aware of whether there were any problems with the winch in relation to Kristy's, two - - -

A I am, I am - - -

Q50 - - - two rescues?

A Yeah, basically I know that at one stage the winch cable was caught up around Kristy's neck and she had a rather large welt mark up her neck. And she also had a problem at one stage with the winch cable getting caught on the life raft.

Q51 I'll - - -

A But I didn't know about that until we had a debrief at the end of the, the crewman who's winching is talking all the time when he's winching the person.

Q52 Yeah.

A I remember Mark Delf saying that she was having problems with the strop, getting the strop over the patient's head. I don't, don't actually remember him saying that, that the winch cable was caught on the life raft, but I distinctly remember him saying, she's

having trouble getting the strop over his head.

Q53 Yeah. How, how many times did you go down to the Stand
Aside?

A Twice.

Q54 All right. Can you tell me about what, what happened
the first time?

A Yeah, Kristy came up, she basically said she needed a
break. I had, I'd been in harness, she's unhooked,
she's got back onto her wander lead, she's unhooked off
the cable, she's passed the cable to me to hook on to.
I've been hooked up, disconnected from my wander lead,
which is a piece of equipment that keeps you attached
in the aircraft until you get onto the cable, you've
got to belt it in and that's just how you do it, when
you're not actually in a seatbelt. The crew person's
given me a check and he always gets the thumbs up
signal to make sure that you wanna go down and do the
winch, 'cause it's entirely up to you, you can pull out
at any time.

Q55 Yeah.

A So I've done all that, gone down and over the side.
Gone into the water and the guy that I had first
winched was not in the life raft but hanging onto the
side of the life raft. Because, actually, prior to
Kristy winching the life raft had been flipped over.
Our crew person had said that, and Kristy's first
patient that she went to was a patient that was in the
water and I only know that because of the crewman

talking when he was, he said, he's actually said to Kristy, "The life raft's flipped, you got two hanging on the side, one in the water", there you go, there was three obviously on the life raft when we started to winch. There was two hanging on the side, one in the water, you need to get the guy in the water first. So she's got the guy in the water and the other guy and then I've gone down to get the third guy who was hanging on to the life raft. I've got down to him, got the strop, tried to put the strop over his head, it wasn't going to work because of the strop that we had was not long enough in length to go over the preserver vests that they had on. And I've chosen to lift, I told the guy that what I wanted him to do was float back on his back and lift his legs and I threaded the strop up over his legs, over his waist, up under his arms, checked the strop, checked the cable, I knew to keep an eye on the cable because of what had happened to Kristy with her neck, in relationship to me, checked the top, checked the cable, told the patient what he was gunna do, what I was gunna do, the patient told me that he was very scared because he hated heights, and so we discussed that briefly, as, as briefly as you could and as well as you could because it was quite noisy and windy with the, with the wind it was quite noisy. I've then given the thumbs up signal to our crewman which means that everything's checked, the survivor's in his strop and I wished to be winched back

up into the helicopter. Given the thumbs up, we've come up out of the water then I remember a, something striking me on the side of the head, and going back, dragged back through the water, then I remember popping out of the water again and I'm thinking, my God, what is going on here. And I could, at that stage see that the winch cable was, the term we use is, fouled, but the rope off the life raft was completely tangled around the winch cable. At that stage I've given our crewman the winch out signal, which is a large, you tap yourself on the head. And he's winched me back out into the water. And at that stage I was in the water with the patient, who I said, you know, 'cause it all happened very quickly, I said, "What the fuck happened?" And he said, "The life raft cylinder has just hit you on the head". And I said, "O.K.". I then checked my cable to see what sort of mess that we had, we had, like I said lots of rope continually tangled around the winch cable. I've gathered a few thoughts in my head at this stage, like, when you do your helicopter training you're taught that if the cable becomes fouled and it's going to endanger the helicopter in any way, you are cut off, the cable's cut off and you are left there. So that ran through my head, I needed, what I was gunna do if we were cut off. I briefly thought that what I would do would grab onto the life raft, flick it over, get myself and the patient into the life raft so we had some shelter and

some sort of beacon that could track us. And, after that, well, it was all, all happened in a matter of seconds. I've then grabbed my knife out of my harness, on our harness we carry what's called a, a jay knife. Grabbed the jay knife out and thought, maybe this'll work. And it did. So I put the jay knife on the rope and prayed like anything that it would cut the rope, 'cause the rope was quite thick, it was probably an inch and a jay knife is just a little plastic knife and it cut it quite well. I felt the, there was a lot of pressure on the, on the rope when I, when I put the jay knife on it, and I felt the pressure release and the life raft blew a long distance away very quickly. I've pulled my hand out of the water to put my knife away and my knife wasn't there any more, so, just the pressure is, 'cause we had wetsuit gloves on as well, and the knife didn't have any sort of, the knife was ripped out of my hand 'cause it was plastic and wet. I've then thought, I hope there's no other ropes. Rechecked my cable, there was no other ropes, I've placed my knife away, spoken to my patient who at this time was quite panicked. And told him that we were ready to be winched again, sort of threw a few calming words at him. Gave a signal to be winched up and was winched up into the helicopter.

Q56 So, you only went down the once, is that, you went back down again?

A I went back down again.

Q57 Just, I should have said something earlier, the two patients that Kristy, patients, the two people - - -

A Survivors - - -

Q57 - - - survivors that - - -

A - - - yeah, patients.

Q57 - - - Kristy brought up, were they injured at all, do you recall?

A No. Not that I remember. One, one guy come up very, what would you say, ill-equipped to be out at sea, he came up with a pair of leather loafers and jeans and polo shirt on. And he was the first one into the boat and I've just thought, into the helicopter, and I thought, my God. 'Cause he actually said, "I'm cold, have you got a blanket?" And I've just gone, we can't access our blankets at the moment, and I just gave him some hearing protection. But all the others that came up had what looked like some sort of decent sailing suit with sailing boots and that on, so whether he was asleep at the time and had his gear off, I don't know, but he, he wasn't appropriately attired for the conditions that he was in. All he had was just a yellow lifesaver vest on.

Q58 The, the person that you, you brought up, was he injured?

A He had a, a cut on his finger, yeah, and was a little bit shocked.

Q59 Yeah. All right. In relation to, to what happened when you went down to bring this particular survivor

up, could this entanglement of the rope and your winch cable, could that have been avoided or is that, just put that down to - - -

A I think it's just part and parcel of, of the conditions and the wind factors on the day. 'Cause what, what actually did it was the wind has completely lifted the life raft, a wave's crested, it's picked the life raft up and it's flung it at me and entangled itself around, like, the only way that it could have been avoided is when we first went down, was to get rid of the life raft altogether and winch directly out of the water.

Q60 Yeah.

A Which is an option that we thought about later. And it might have worked quite well, just with the way the wind gusts were.

Q61 Did you know what had hit you in the head?

A No, no, I knew I'd been hit by something but I didn't know what it was.

Q62 Were you injured on that particular rescue?

A No.

Q63 That hit into the head didn't - - -

A It, it didn't knock me out, it, I remember going under the water and, and seeing black starry things for a minute, I actually had a helmet on, and I've come up but I, I had all my full faculties about me, only a couple of days later I had a, a bit of a sore neck but that, I think, was more, it was a, the muscles down the side of my neck were very sore and I think that was

because with the hit on the side of the head it's actually flicked my neck right over to one side of my head, my head right over to one side. So there was no immediate injury arose from the incident, no.

Q64 Now, it's my understanding that you spent considerable amount of time under water at one stage. Is that right?

A Well, apparently but my, it didn't seem like a long time to me. I was, Kristy has a greater memory of being under the water for a long period of time, I just remember being hit, being under the water and coming up. So I mean I didn't think it was a long time. And I, yeah.

Q65 So the problems that you encountered in relation to your first - - -

A Winch.

Q65 - - - winch down, they were just weather related problems, do you think, not equipment problems as such?

A No, I don't, they, I don't think they were equipment problems, as such, as far as our equipment's concerned, or even, even theirs, I just think it was weather related. It was just huge seas and winds and, and a life raft which was actually, like, tethered off to a boat, like, just being flung around.

Q66 O.K. All right. Now, you've said you went down a second time?

A Yeah.

Q67 Can you tell me what happened then?

A Yeah.

Q68 Why, why you did that?

A Why I did that. We got back up into the helicopter and we put the survivor into a seat, I sat on the edge of the helicopter and my crewman asked me if I was all right. I said that I was O.K, and I said, "I have to do this again". And he said, "Yes". And I said, "Mm". 'Cause there was basically one survivor left on a sinking boat with no life raft, so, they weren't going to leave him there. I was concerned at that stage that the winch cable was not going to carry the weight of me because of the entanglement, the winch cable had a lot of kinks in it and, I mean I'm not really good on the terminology but basically when your winch cable's kinked or if you can feel any frays they, they usually take them into cable off line and replace it. My crewman's had a look at the winch cable, he's assessed it with his hands and he said, "In these circumstances I think that it is O.K. to winch", and he said, and we were winching over water which was another bonus.

Q69 Right. Absolutely. All right. So - - -

A And so then I've, yeah, a little few words of encouragement from the crewman, I've gone back down, prior to going down there was, like I said, there was one guy at this stage left on, on the boat. And he's actually pointed to the boat and then the water, and he had a rope tethered to his waist.

Q70 Yeah.

A Our crewman's gone like that, he's jumped off the boat into the water and very quickly he made some distance from, away from the boat, just as I would suspect from the currents. I've then winched down, I've winched down to him, I've got him into the strop, I didn't try to put it over his head this time, I just said, "It's not gunna fit, this is how we're gunna do it". Boom, up under his arms, he untied his rope, made sure that he was all right, checked the cable, gave the thumbs up, was winched up out of the water and into the helicopter. Very easy, that one was very easy compared to the last one.

Q71 Well, how did you know that the strop wasn't going to fit him, or did you - - -

A Only basically from my experience from the first guy, because the, because their preserver vests were so bulky - - -

Q72 Yeah.

A - - - the strop just didn't have the length, as such, to go, 'cause it's got to go over one arm, through one arm, under an armpit, over a head and over another arm, and basically if you get it over the arm when you got around to the chest and getting it over the head, because their chest was bulked out with the life preserver, unless they could sort of dislocate their head somehow it was very difficult to get it over their head. Now, Kristy actually managed with her first guy and, I think, and the second guy, but, the technique

that I used was a technique that we'd been shown in our training course and I thought it was just easier to do it that way. I thought, the other way you can do it is unlatch, the strop does have a buckle on it that you can unlatch, going down the first time I looked at, at the strop and thought about unlatching it, but the wind was that strong that I thought if I unlatched the strop which then makes it really quite long, that the metal buckle part was gonna flick up and flick us in the face. So I chose to leave the strop done up. And in the conditions that we were in, it's very difficult when you're sort of being buoyed up and down and tumbling through waves to sort of re-find a connection point, so I decided to leave it connected and go up over their feet. Which worked well, 'cause they had preservers on so they could sort of float back on their back.

Q73 Was, was that person injured?

A No, don't believe so. I mean they were all very fatigued, and they were cold, but, as in, like, injuries that we could see, there wasn't -

Q74 Can you describe the weather conditions to me?

A It was windy, very windy. I couldn't, I mean there's been estimations of like 50 to 60 knot winds, I remember the wind was that strong the first time I was going down I kept thinking that there was something slapping me on the face, and what it was like, just the rain hitting my face. So the wind was really quite

strong. It was raining, our visibility was very poor. It came over in, with the visibility was like, it was almost like a, like the cloud mass just kept seemed to getting lower and lower. And just the visibility was worse. The waves were rather large, I mean I've always said two-storey buildings and then some people have estimated 20 metres, but they were very, very large waves. Yeah.

Q75 Had you, had you seen anything like it in your time, the weather - - -

A No, I've not, I've never - - -

Q75 - - - on that day - - -

A - - - never encountered - - -

Q76 The conditions?

A Never encountered weather conditions like that before.

Q77 In relation to the, what you did on that day, is there anything that the, the rescuees could have done that would have made this in any way easier?

A The people that we were rescuing?

Q78 Yeah. And specifically, well, say the two that you, you brought up?

A I mean things would have been a lot easier if we had have been able to have some direct communication with the boat and our helicopter. Because we might have been able to say, look, we're not gonna use the life raft any more. This is how we're going, we're tethering off to the boat, we're putting you in the water. But, we had, I, I understand that we had

problems having, with communication with the boat. At, at the time the way that they had set up was probably the best that they could come up with. So I mean I don't think they could have, I mean other than one of my patients being a bit more calmer than what he was, I don't think they could have made it any easier. Basically, once they were tipped out of the life raft, they were just too exhausted to climb back into the life raft, so they were just hanging on to the sides of it.

Q79 Were, were they suitably equipped, do you think, the rescuees, I mean you've already outlined what one bloke came up wearing.

A Yeah, I feel, like, all the rest of them, at, you know, had, like, suitable gear on them, other than the first survivor that came up where he didn't appear to have any like, wet weather protection gear on. I mean, I mean - - -

Q80 That's all right.

A - - - we, we have locator beacons, I mean, I mean it's been a huge issue and yeah, I believe that they probably should have all had them as well, simply because once the life raft flipped and the first guy did come off and he was in the water they were taken away very quickly with the current and in the weather conditions it just would have been an easier source to pick up, 'cause we had the equipment to pick up the beacons, rather than looking for one tiny little light

speck in an ocean that's very large and got lots of white capped waves on it.

Q81 Did the four people on board the helicopter, and when is say, your crew, of which you were a part, did you all have crew vests that day?

A No.

Q82 Can you tell me what a crew vest is?

A A crew vest, they're actually called, they're an inflatable vest that basically is a flotation device that you use when you need. Within the vest crew people wear, there is a emergency locater beacon, there is, it's a locater beacon but it's also a radio, where, so we can talk and give a locating position. There's also some dyes, sea dye marker, and there's day/night flares.

Q83 Do you know how many of those were on board that day?

A Two.

Q84 Senior Constable Woods, at this stage?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

No, nothing.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q85 Is there anything further you'd like to say to me in relation to the events of the 27th of December, 1998?

A No.

Q86 What, what time were you stood down that day, do you recall?

A It was about, 7.00, 8 o'clock at night. I know that we got back to Mallacoota, we were told when we got back

to Mallacoota that there was no fuel, so we dropped off the survivors, we've then got back into the aircraft, flown from Mallacoota back to Merimbula, refuelled the helicopter, at that stage they wanted us to go out again and, because while we were out there we heard two Maydays, two memorable Maydays. They wanted us to go out and search for these. But due to the, the refuelling it just didn't happen before our replacement crew got down there. And I think they got down there about 7.00, 8 o'clock.

Q87 O.K. What Maydays were they?

A The Winston Churchill and the Sword of Orion. The Sword of Orion we heard very soon after getting on site, before we'd commenced winching. Because I think they actually asked us to go to the Sword of Orion but we couldn't 'cause basically there was four people left that needed to be winched and Helimed had basically had an overloaded helicopter as it was.

Q88 Prior to that day, being the 27th, Michelle, what would have been, would there be a sum total of your experience with sea rescues of that nature?

A Yeah, the sum total would be nil.

Q89 Anything else out of that?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q90

A We did our, we did water training. And our water training was conducted in Lake Burly Griffin.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q91 So we believe. We've been told that. Are you critical of that or -?

A No, I don't think we could have, no water training that we did in the sea could have prepared us for the conditions that we went into that day. And our basic training that we got in the water at Lake Burly Griffin was enough to get us to do the job. I mean it made us understand, well, it made me think of my knife with rope, et cetera.

Q92 Yeah.

A Yeah.

Q93 That indicates that that tape's about to conclude, so we're going to need to get fresh ones.

INTERVIEW SUSPENDED

INTERVIEW RESUMED

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q94 This interview is resumed. The time is 2.15pm, eastern standard time. Michelle, do you agree that the interview was suspended for a short time while we changed tapes?

A Yes.

Q95 You happy to continue with the interview?

A Yes.

Q96 One last question in relation to the events of the 27/12/1998. Your personal fears or otherwise of what occurred that day, what you had to do?

A Yeah, there was a time when my personal fear was at a

rather elevated level. I actually thought that I was going to die, not going to die, but, there was a high potential that I was going to die, because I actually thought that the winch cable was going to be cut. And I thought, I'm not going to survive out in these seas for very long. So I mean, yeah, as a personal fear factor, yeah, there was points where it was very high for me.

Q97 And, I just said that was the last question, make it the second last, and your impression of your co-crew, that day, in relation to what went on out there?

A I would think that my co-crew all had very similar feelings. I think they all had their own, realised their own mortality, immortality, whatever you wanna say.

Q98 All right. Anything you want to ask?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

No.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q99 No, all right. We'll move on to the 28th of December, 1998 and you indicated earlier that you were involved in some sort of operation again on that day.

A Yeah.

Q100 Can you tell me, well, run me through the events of that day as you remember them?

A Yeah, we were asked to be back out at the Southcare base that morning by 7.30, 8 o'clock, which Kristy and myself both were. We were then put on a plane and we

flew down to Merimbula where we took over the night crew. We had a brief discussion with, well, I had a brief discussion with one of the night crew members that had been involved in some winching. And they got some gear together and we got our gear together, we then went and, they showed us where they'd stored, stowed the excess helicopter operational gear. Kristy and I got into our wetsuits, come back out to the aircraft, we were briefed by our crew person that we were going out on a search and rescue mission. We proceeded to get into our harnesses and our crew vests and we proceeded out to, we call it search and rescue line search, you're actually given a, a segment of area to search over, and at that stage we were supposedly looking for the missing sailor off the Sword of Orion.

Q101 Yeah. Was it the same crew that day, Michelle?

A No, there was myself, Kristy McAlister, the pilot Ray Stone was the same, we had a different crewman, our crewman was a relief crewman from Western Australia by the name of George Casey.

Q102 All right. So your specific tasking in the first instance was a missing sailor?

A Yeah, to search an area for a missing sailor.

Q103 And did that occur?

A Yes, it did. We went out and we did some searching. And came across very little until the end of the search where we picked up a, a homing beacon distress signal and tracked it.

Q104 And what was the result of that?

A We tracked it and we came across a, a yacht, we did a close flyover to the yacht trying to pick up the name of the yacht, I think, so our pilot could get back onto the main COMSEN people that were running the search and rescue to see if, to find information out about the yacht. We picked up the name Naiad, Business Post or Business Post Naiad, whatever you'd like to say. On doing the first fly low, flyover and our pilot suggested that there was a body on the top deck of the boat. We, I said I didn't think, I thought there was some boxes, and he said, "No, I'll take you on another low flyover, I think there's a body and I think it looks pretty cactus jack". So we've done another low flyover, I've agreed that yes, there was a body on the boat. And that as we were about to fly off I thought it waved to us.

Q105 Right. So what happened then?

A I said to the pilot, through the intercom system, "Ray, I think he's just waved at us". And Ray laughed at me because he'd been in contact with the comms people and they had said, that, yes, that that boat had, had a helicopter at it that morning where people had winched off and there was two confirmed deceased, confirmed deceased, that's how we were given it, bodies on the aircraft. But Ray said, basically, "Michelle, if you think you've seen it, we'll do another low flyover". So we did another one and we sort of all agreed that,

yes, O.K, there was no waving that time. And then we headed back into, we, yeah, we'd just about finished our, we'd just about finished our search pattern but because we tracked the beacon I think we became afield, but we headed back in to Merimbula. And refuelled the helicopter and had a lunch break. During the lunch break I'd actually caught up with one of the operators of the helicopter that had winched off that boat and I spoke to him about it, I, it was just, I dunno, just had a feeling, I dunno, I spoke to him about how they were winched off, and I said, you know, how did, I said, "It must've been really quite hairy for someone to get on that boat and declare them dead, because of the conditions". And he said that they didn't do that. And I said, "So, no person from your helicopter had actually put hands on those people to declare them dead?" And he said, "No". He said, "But they were declared dead".

Q106 Did he say how, how that declaration was able to be made?

A No.

Q107 Would it, would it be correct to assume that it's been the word of someone rescued off that, off the boat?

A My understanding was that, yes, it was the word of the, of the, of the survivors off the yacht. Apparently, and this is like, from memory, he said that they had communications with the boat, they gave the message to the boat that all survivors were to jump into the

water. Now, I mean I don't know how true it is, but this is what he said to me. And that's what they did, and from my understanding they winched seven, seven, seven off the Business Post Naiad and they were the seven that jumped in the water. 'Cause I did sort of say, you know, how did, how did you know that they were dead. And he said, well, basically they didn't jump in the water, the crew had made a decision they weren't going on the boat, so, yeah, I went, O.K.

Q108 Is it your experience as a paramedic that people can certainly display symptoms that would indicate they were dead and that may not be the case?

A Yeah. It is my experience as a paramedic, and particularly in the conditions, a, a hypothermic patient will display very shallow to nil resps and a very slow cut out pulse rate, they'll be cold and blue but they're alive.

Q109 On this particular day, I'll get away from that point there, but on this particular day were your crew actually involved in any rescues?

A Yeah. Southcare rescued seven people off the Midnight Special, in the early hours of the - - -

Q110 No, but I mean your, your crew when you went out that day?

A Our crew was not involved in any other rescues that day.

Q111 So the, the total of your involvement that day was these line searches specifically?

A Yeah.

Q112 How many of those did you do that day, do you recall?

A We went out to finish the second one off, we seen a life raft which, we came across a life raft which was empty, which we believed to be empty, we flew over numerous times and we actually had quite good vision into the life raft. And we then had a light come on in the helicopter which suggested that there was a problem with the fuel pump and they, every time that they would reset the light so it would go off, it comes up on a master caution warning panel, it'd jump a circuit in the helicopter, what circuit I don't know, I'm not into the electrical side of it. So basically we finished off the, the line search and we headed back to Merimbula and informed the people that our aircraft will be off line until basically, we can't go back on line until an engineer looks at it and says, O.K, this is the problem and it's, you're right to fly in it. And that was the sum total, then we did a lot of sitting around.

Q113 The winch equipment onboard that day, wasn't used - - -

A No.

Q113 - - - during your shift?

A No, it wasn't used. The actual winch cable on the evening of the 27th, our engineer from the Southcare base flew down and replaced the winch cable because it was deemed to be unsafe to be winched on again.

Q114 Senior Constable Woods?

PLAINCLOTHES SENIOR CONSTABLE WOODS

Q115 Just one thing, just your assessment of conditions that day by comparison with the previous?

A Like a walk in the park, beautiful, it was a beautiful morning, it was sunny, there was not a lot of wind and I dunno, the sea, seas would have been 4 to 5 metres. Very, very very different to the day before.

Q116 Nothing further.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q117 Is there anything else you want to say about the events of the 28th of December, and this is your opportunity.

A I mean - - -

Q118 When I say, anything else you want to say, any recommendations you, you've thought of, something you could suggest done better?

A We talked about the Business Post Naiad person, I was actually happy myself to go down that day, I'd actually, when I thought I'd seen the patient wave I was prepared to go down onto the boat and assess him. But when it was confirmed that, that they had been confirmed dead, it's not worth the, the risks of me going down to say again, yes, he is dead. I mean the only other thing that I would have, I would have either liked to never have known that there was never any hands contact on that patient or I would have liked to have known that someone did properly declare that person dead. And I've spoke to a few people about it and, on a lot of the yachts there was doctors, now, I

didn't follow it up, I followed it up briefly but I dunno, maybe with clever investigation you might find that there was a doctor or someone with some sort of medical background on that boat that could have quite adequately declared those people dead but at this stage I don't know that.

Q119 M'mm. Just bear with me, Michelle, while I just look through my list. We may have discussed this and if we have I apologise, but just in relation to winching in general, winch rescues in general, and I suppose if we apply it to sea rescues, would there be a preferred method, or is it just something that depends on factors at the time?

A I think it depends on factors at the time. I mean it depends who you talk to, I, I know in our debriefs we spoke a lot about, yeah, we should have got rid of the life raft very early, but then someone within the Lloyd system, which is the system that trained us, said, "No, that's a really silly idea, it's your best option to winch out of", but I think it's just, it just depends on that situation. With the winds and the sea that, the way they were that day, your best option for winching was to be winching in an open water area where there is no chance that any obstacles can get in your way because with, because you had to contend with so much current and so much being tossed through the waves, that was just how you were going to do it. I mean on a fine sunny beautiful day, where the waves are

only 2 to 3 metres high, yes, to winch out of a life raft would be perfect, you're not getting your survivor wet, et cetera, there's no chance that your survivor's gunna float off. But in the conditions that we winched in on that day, I believe the best way that we could have winched was in open water with no life raft and no boat around the area.

Q120 And that didn't occur, did it, for whatever, till you'd cut that - - -

A No, until the entanglement happened it didn't occur.

Q121 Anything else?

SENIOR CONSTABLE WOOD

Nothing further.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE WALPOLE

Q122 Anything else you want to say?

A (NO AUDIBLE REPLY)

Q123 All right. The time is 3.30, sorry, 2.32pm, eastern standard time. This interview is complete.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED