

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q1 Now this is an electronically recorded interview between Detective Senior Constable Stuart Gray and Senior Constable David Key at the Victorian Police Air Wing, Essendon, on Saturday, the 17th of April, 1999. Also present, seated directly opposite me, is Senior Constable David Upston from the New South Wales Water Police. The time on my watch is now 8.50am. As I already explained to you, David, we're making inquiries in relation to the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race and part of our tasking is to speak to those involved in the, the various rescue organisations during the, the actual incident. So first if I could just get you to state your full name?

A O.K. My name is David Ernest Key, I'm a Senior Constable of Police stationed at the Victorian Police Air Wing. My role here is senior air observer and my role on the day, or the 2 days of the Sydney to Hobart, I was the rescue crewman.

Q2 O.K. And your date of birth?

A Is 23rd of the 11th, 1954.

Q3 O.K. Just some background experience. How long have you been with the Victorian Police for?

A 15 years in the Police Force.

Q4 And how long in the Air Wing?

A 9 years in the Air Wing.

Q5 O.K. Now you said you were rescue crewman on board Pol-Air 1 - - -

A Pol-Air 1.

Q5 - - - during the period 27th, 28th of December, '98.

A That is correct.

Q6 Can you just explain to me what the role of the rescue crewman is?

A The rescue crewman's task is to actually assess the rescue mission with the rest of the crew, make sure that it's safe for him to go down the wire, make sure the equipment is there for the rescue that they are conducting, is then tasked to go down the wire into the water in this case, and rescue the person that's in distress either off the yacht, beside the yacht or in our case, the person that was washed off some distance away, and is to secure them, check them for injuries and then bring them back up to the aircraft and administer first aid if required.

Q7 Right. Now can you tell me who the crew were on board Pol-Air 1 on the 27th, 28th?

A Yes. The pilot was Senior Constable Daryl Jones and the winch operator on that day was Senior Constable Barry Barclay.

Q8 O.K. Now I wonder if I could take you to Sunday, the 27th of December, if you could take us through the events of that day?

A O.K. The crew, we started at 10 o'clock on that morning, just normal police duties for the day, normal police patrolling around the metropolitan area of Melbourne. At approximately 3.50pm on the Sunday, the

27th, we were tasked to come back to Essendon because we had been allocated by AUSAR in Canberra to attend down at Mallacoota for a, two or three yachts that were in distress, who had set off E.L.T. beacons, who were in distress. At the same time Heli-Med 1 from Latrobe Valley was also despatched down there. We took care of a few administration problems we had here, because now AUSAR is privatised we are not automatically despatched, we have to get permission from our O.C. Once that was obtained we then launched from here and headed to Latrobe Valley to, for fuel. The trip down to Latrobe Valley was O.K. no problems, we refuelled and headed to Mallacoota. As soon as we left Latrobe Valley, which was probably about 5 o'clock I think it was, we struck a storm front and it was an extremely violent storm front, and the problems we had was visibility so we had to climb to I.F.R. flight, and what we found was that our air split indicator indicated we were doing 205 knots. That has never happened at the Air Wing before. The top speed of the aircraft is 120 knots, which is about 240, 250 kilometres an hour. We were punching along at 300 and, nearly 3 to 400 kilometres an hour, that's the tail wind. We didn't know whether the aircraft could handle it, it was just that strong, we've never experienced wind speeds of that, that strength. Very short period of time we landed at Mallacoota. We were then briefed there by Sergeant Mostad of the Gippsland Water Police

and we were in constant communications with AUSAR. At, on our tasking on the way down we heard the Winston Churchill give its Mayday, that was quite chilling just listening to that. We were tasked actually to go and look for that and the indication we had it was about 20, 20 miles south of Twofold Bay, I think it is. That was the last known reported area, and that was our initial tasking was to go and try and find that boat. We, when we landed and we were briefed, we then got retasked to go to the V.C. Offshore Stand Aside. At that stage Heli-Med 1 was out there conducting winching and took eight people off that boat, and we were tasked to take the last four off. At this stage it was about 60 nautical miles, which is about 120 kilometres offshore from Mallacoota out in the Bass Strait. The storm at Mallacoota was absolutely violent, it was just, we hadn't experienced anything like that before, and Bass Strait is our rescue area and we've had some rough weather down there but nothing, nothing like this. We de-kitted the aircraft, which means we offloaded our seats, harness and the rest of our search and rescue equipment that we didn't need, to lighten the load to be able to take four extra people on board. We put in, we've topped up with fuel and then started to head out to the V.C. Offshore Stand Aside. At that stage the Channel 2 helicopter was holding air cover over that for, to guide us in. On the flight out there again we had 205 knots air speed, which means we had a

horrific tail wind, and to cover that distance should have taken us probably up to an hour, we did it in about 15 minutes, and the wind was just whipping the sea up into a, into a foam, it was just streaking the water. The waves were fairly big but we didn't know how big. There was rain, it was sheet rain, and very low cloud, probably in patches 2,000 feet down to 600 feet, and it was just, felt the inside of a storm going through. En route out to the Stand Aside we were then redirected by AUSAR for Mayday calls, and off to the ship called, or the yacht called Siena, I think was the, the name of it, and also the Business Post Naiad. We were tasked to head to their latitude and longitudes because they were demasted, rolled, they were sinking and a lot of injured crewmen on those two boats. So we left that location and South Care from Canberra was then retasked to attend to the V.C. Offshore Stand Aside to rescue the last four crewmen. As we started to head out, at this stage we had three tasks, which was the Winston Churchill, Siena, the Business Post Naiad. As we were heading out there we then got another call for a man overboard who had been off for about 3 hours, and I just can't remember the name of the boat, it was the English yachtsman that got washed overboard.

Q9 Oh, that'd be Sword of Orion.

A Sword of Orion, that's it. But at this stage Heli-Med 1 was on its way in so it couldn't do anything, South

Care was winching four off, they couldn't do anything, and of course we were then tasked with all these different things that were going on, and then at that time the Kingara, we got word that a man had just been washed overboard off the Kingara, and we could hear all this radio chatter going on and AUSAR were doing their best to prioritise the tasks for us to go to. They were then retasked us to go to the Kingara, gave us the latitude and longitude, excuse me, and we headed off there. We got there at about 7.30pm on the Sunday night to the area where we were told their latitude and longitude was. When we got there there was, we couldn't see the yacht. The water was just white, it was, where it wasn't white it was black, absolutely black, and the waves were much bigger than what we'd seen before. We started, from where the latitude and longitude was we started a circular repat search, ever expanding, to try and find this yacht. We just couldn't see it, our visibility was extremely poor, only a couple of hundred metres, so we were really struggling to find anything. Through the mist Barry Barclay observed a red flare go off in the mist. We then headed straight for that and we made, he made radio contact on marine distress frequency 16 with the crew of the Kingara. They then told us what had happened, that he'd been washed overboard, they'd rolled, he slipped out of his harness and was behind the boat somewhere and they'd lost sight of him, been

in the water for about 40 minutes at this stage, had no life jacket but he had his yachties' - - -

Q10 Wet weather gear.

A - - - wet weather gear on, and they said he was behind the boat only a couple of hundred metres. Well, we started, again went to that area, started our circular search. We were being thrown around something violently. You know, if you're thrown around in a helicopter you know you're in bad weather, and we were just being tossed left right and centre, and we had to brace ourselves in the machine to actually stop ourselves from being thrown around, which wasn't very pleasant. We had the driving rain, and you could hear the water, the, the spray hit the helicopter, just like nails being thrown at it, or stones, that's how, how hard it was. Daryl was flying, Barry was looking out the left hand side of the aircraft through an open door, and I was looking out the right hand side of the aircraft through a closed door. Daryl couldn't really concentrate on looking, he was flat out flying, he was, when you do normal winching, when you're hovering you have zero air speed on your indicator. We had 80 knots forward speed on the indicator and we were stationary, that's how strong the wind was, it was 80 knots. We still see the Kingara just basic, roughly through the, through the mist every now and then. I spotted a yellow, sorry, an orange life ring in the water and it looked like there was someone in it, so I told the

crew, we moved the helicopter to the right so Barry could have a good look down from his side, and at that stage another wave came up, tossed it over and there was no one in the life ring. At that time he noticed something out of the peripheral vision of his eye and when we looked there was a fellow in the water waving, which was just incredible, we were in the same trough, there were huge troughs out there and we were just going from trough to trough to try and see what we could find. The person waved and then put his head down and went under the water, just sank under the water. I was already kitted up ready to go with my wetsuit, flippers and helmet. Barry kept him in sight. We then moved across to above him and he, when the waves broke over him he'd pop back up again. He was dressed in black, he had black long johns on and a black T-shirt, and we were wondering why he was dressed like that, later we found out why. I then went out onto the skid and then started to be dropped below the helicopter. The wind was that strong that I was being forced backwards and I was looking up at the tail of the helicopter, so I was on about a 45 degree angle because of the wind force, and normally you go straight down. Now because I was at that angle, and when I started to go down to the wave levels I knew they were huge because there was still, I thought about 50 foot below me, and of course I then got smacked with a wave, and when I hit the water it was absolutely freezing, I

popped back up and all of a sudden there was just this horrendous wall of water in front of me. I couldn't hear the helicopter and I couldn't see the helicopter, and I've never experienced that before and I'm also a winch operator and crewman instructor and so I've done a lot of winches and a lot of training, and I've never had this happen to me. What I immediately thought was that I'd been punched off, and that means that if the aircraft's in trouble or if anything's happened the first thing to go is the wire's cut, the crewman goes to save the aircraft. And it was just a horrendous feeling, I, I must, I was, you know, shitting myself actually to put it bluntly, and I just couldn't see the fellow I was rescuing, I didn't know sort of basically where I was and I couldn't hear, hear or see the helicopter, and I thought, That's it, I've just been punched off, I'm 120 kilometres offshore and there's no one to rescue me. So I thought, O.K. this is not much, not much fun. Then what happened is I went up the face of this wave, and it was like a solid apartment block. It wasn't a curled wave like you normally see at a beach or a swell that we see in the ocean, and you understand this from the Water Police, it was a solid block of water. Because I was in a wetsuit and had buoyancy equipment on, I went up the face of the wave. I don't know how many feet I got up it but then I started to tumble back down the face of the wave until I hit the bottom. I started to go back up again and

then I was dragged through the wave, and I was probably under the water for about 20 seconds, took a gutful of water and I actually popped out on the back of the wave and actually fell I think about 30 or 40 feet to the bottom of the trough. That winded me, took another gutful of water, proceeded to throw up, which wasn't much, wasn't much fun. At that stage I started to do 360's in the water, which means I was looking around for the person I was supposed to be rescuing. I still didn't see him. I looked up, still couldn't see the helicopter and I still couldn't hear the helicopter. I went up the next wave, I went through the next wave and then tumbled back down the, the back of it into the water and of course went under the water. When I popped back up, this was about the third wave now, I was ready to inflate my life jacket and set off my emergency beacon that I had, 'cause I was just, that's it, I thought, I've had it, and I was just ready to, to go. And when I popped back up, all of a sudden, about 10 to 15 feet in front of me, bang, this fellow popped up out of the water and just looked at me. I just went, Well, bloody hell. He was just white, there was no blood in him, there was just this stare and he must have realised and he actually, we swam towards each other, we were in a trough. As I grabbed him we were then hit by another wave and he was just a dead weight, there was no buoyancy with him, he was just a complete dead weight, and I could see he was in probably the

last stages of hypothermia, he was extremely cold after touch, like a, like a snake type touch. We went under the water, we came back up, both coughing and spluttering, I then put the rescue harness, the rescue strop we call it, over him, put his arms through the loop and held on to him and gave the indicator, which is a hand above the head, to be winched up to the helicopter. At that stage the actual winch wire got wrapped around my leg and I quickly untangled that because if you get tension on that it'll just rip, rip your arm off, there's no two, or your leg off, there's just no two ways about it. At that stage I still couldn't hear or see the helicopter. The wind noise was absolutely horrific, it was a screaming, howling noise, I've never heard anything like it either. Once we, I put my hand up, next second, bang, I got jerked out of the water. Then I got hit by the, the face of the, another wave. We sort of went through that and came up. This fellow was just absolutely limp, there was just no sort of life in him. His face was very badly, say you'd call it beaten. Obviously he'd taken a very heavy blow to the head, to around his eye socket and his jaw and his nose. A lot of blood there, and you could see that he'd taken a very heavy whack to his face, maybe hit by a boom or something like that, I'm not quite sure. As we were coming up to the helicopter he was starting to slip out from my grip, 'cause normally you can hang on to a person, he was just like

an eel, slippery eel, and he couldn't help himself. I think he just completely relaxed and just given up type of thing. As we came up towards the helicopter, probably about 3 or 4 foot from the step the winch froze, so the winch stopped, which is not a good position to be in. The, I could see the look on Barry's eyes, I knew there was something wrong and I thought, that's it, you know, now how in the hell do we get back inside. We'd talked about all contingencies and problems and emergencies and so close to the helicopter it's most, so far away because you can't pull the people in. The fellow was starting to slip, I was extremely fatigued and tired and I was gripping as hard as I could but I was just like numb, trying, trying to hold him. Barry actually leant out of the aircraft on his strap that he had, leant right down, grabbed this fellow by the long johns and undies and actually reefed him up inside the helicopter. I was still hanging outside and hopefully Barry would have been able to pull me back in on the cable, but with two of us on it he just wouldn't have had the strength to do it. The winch recycled and we had power, I was then winched back inside the helicopter. Campbell was extremely appreciative, gave us hugs and kisses, a bit of a Tony Bullimore, Bullimar thing, and we could see he was, had pretty serious injuries, head injuries, facial injuries and was extremely hypothermic and now

starting to go into shock. We actually laid down beside him and sort of virtually cuddled him virtually.

Q11 Mmm.

A We all sort of, Barry and I sort of grabbed each other, had him between us to transfer our body heat, and we rubbed his arms and legs and after about 15 minutes or so he started to come good. And that's when they explained to me that the waves were 90 feet that I went down into, and the way they could tell that is we have a, a radalt or a altimeter, it measures the bottom of the aircraft, a beam that goes down and measures the surface area, whether it's land or water, and it gives a height in feet. Those waves were going from zero to 90, which means from the top of the wave to the bottom of the trough was 90 feet, and that's how we can tell it was at that height.

Q12 Mmm.

A At one stage during the winch, Daryl was telling me on the way back, that he actually was looking out through his windscreen and there was a wave coming at him at his height, he actually pulled up and the wave came through at 140 feet under the aircraft, and he could tell that by the needle, and he'll explain that better
- - -

Q13 Mmm.

A - - - on his situation, so there was 140 foot of it came through. No wonder I was having trouble in the water - - -

Q14

Mmm.

A

- - - great deal of trouble. We then headed back in, we had enough fuel, we informed Kingara that we had him, 'cause they obviously couldn't see us, they were elated. We informed AUSAR straight away and we informed Mallacoota that we had him. By this stage it was just getting dark so we headed back in. As we headed back in we hit another squall and we had a ground speed of not even 40 knots, that's how strong now the head wind heading back to Mallacoota. We spoke to Heli-Med 1 and they had the same problem, and they, I think they got about 80 foot waves, 80 to 90 foot waves on their instrument readings, so they were in much the same pickle as what we were, and they were just about back to Mallacoota. 'Cause the wind was so strong we were using more fuel than anticipated and unfortunately we had to discuss the situation of ditching out there, knowing that there was no one to rescue us, which is a pretty, pretty daunting thought when you think about it, and it's nearly night time. We didn't let Campbell know, didn't think he needed those, those problems, so we discussed amongst the crew on the different situations and scenarios that might play out, and we were preparing ourselves for that. We managed to make it to shore and to the Mallacoota Oval with sufficient fuel. Campbell was then transferred from our helicopter to a road ambulance and then transferred out to Mallacoota Airport, he was taken by

fixed wing air ambulance to Teralgon Hospital. We were then, while that was happening the three of us just looked at each other and we were just high on adrenalin I think, where we'd been and what we'd done. We'd never, the three of us had never experienced anything like that before. And we went back to the Mallacoota Police Station, debriefed Sergeant Mostad on what we'd done, what had happened out there, the different locations we'd been allocated, because he didn't have the AUSAR frequency, he didn't know what we were doing out there, and in my running sheet it's got all the positions that we were actually given, latitude and longitudes to go and look for these, these different craft. We finished about 11 o'clock that night. We then got up at 5 o'clock the next morning. We were then briefed by Sergeant Mostad again. At this stage we were going out to look for the Winston Churchill. No one had heard from it, no E.L.T's had gone off, and at this stage they were just an unknown location and our task was to go out to, to look for that. While we're heading out there we're also tasked to look for the B-52 which is also reported missing with no communications, so that was two yachts that there was, heard nothing from. So we went out there and as we started to go to the B-52's area, it's last known location, we were then retasked to the Midnight Special, who had rolled, the hull was cracked, taking water, no motor, no mast, no nothing, and in the

process of sinking. I think it was the Channel 2 helicopter located it, and South Care beat us to it and they winched five people off that, which was the smart thing to do because they had two paramedics, actual paramedics on board, and they took off the people with the most serious injuries. Even though we're paramedic trained it's better for them to take the most serious injury, injured people off. We went straight to the yacht, we had a look at the yacht and assessed the, the winching technique that we were going to use, and the technique we used, it was too dangerous for me to go onto the yacht. At this stage the waves were still about 60 feet, compared to Sunday it's a walk in the park. The white winds were still about 70 knots and the water was still pretty violent, pretty, still pretty vicious out there, so it hadn't abated that much over that, that period. We couldn't speak to the people on the yacht so we didn't know what injuries they had or what their situation was. There was a lot of sail, rope, cable in the water around the yacht, so what was decided, that I'd actually be winched to the back area of the yacht, about probably 30 feet from it, and the technique where I wait for a trough to come through, get the person to jump in and they come straight to me, put the rescue harness on and up we go. Got out the door, went down, same thing again, I was pushed backwards because of the force of the wind, and into the water, and this time I was able to be dragged

through the water fairly quickly to the back of the yacht. I then indicated for the first man to jump in, which he did, and he had a very old type of life jacket, a very thick foam type of life jacket on, which made him very buoyant, and he came to me very quickly, so I grabbed him, put the harness on, told him what was happening, asked him about his injuries, and then went straight up to the helicopter, put him in the door, straight back down into the water, and at this stage there was still a rope that went past me, well, it was in the water past me so I swam backwards to make sure I didn't get tangled, it was the last thing I wanted, indicated to the next fellow to jump in, jumped in, I grabbed him, briefed him and took him up to the helicopter. At this stage I still swallowed a fair amount of water again 'cause of just being thrown around like a rag doll, it was just, it was horrendous, absolutely horrendous. Put him in, went back down for the third person, and when this fellow jumped in he didn't wait for my sort of signal to jump in, he jumped in on top of a wave, which unfortunately made him go virtually straight past me, I had to be picked up out of the water and plonked back down in front of him. He was extremely panicked and when I was trying to get a hold of him it was, well, I was virtually fighting with him, 'cause he just wanted to grab me and get out of there, and I don't blame him. So I put the harness on him, told him what, what I needed him to do. He tended

to calm down a little bit and at this stage I looked up and I could actually see water coming out of the cabin area and washing over the back of the boat where the last fellow was sitting on the back of the boat. We were then plucked out of the water and he started to panic again, fairly elderly gentleman and he was sort of thrashing around which, I was starting to get fatigued which really zapped a lot of my energy just controlling him up to the machine, got up to the doorway, pushed him in, and at that stage I started to vomit, vomit again and I said I'd have to have a rest for about a minute to just recompose myself, get my breath back, and the pilot said he needed a break as well 'cause he was starting to cramp up, just fighting the machine to, to hold it steady, 'cause he was being thrown around like a, like a rag doll up, up there in the air. The problem with that is with wind shear and downdrafts they can just drive the helicopter straight in the water, so he's really fighting it up there. And what we did, we actually flew a, a circle around the yacht, mainly for the pilot to relax himself, the machine to sort of stabilise itself, and the crew just to compose themselves, make sure the people that are in there are secure and they know what's going on. Unfortunately we flew away into the mist and the fog, which was still fairly prevalent in that area. We came back, back to about 120 odd feet above the water and I was winched back down into the water, and when I got

there I indicated for the last man to jump in. He, he jumped to me, I secured him and when we were plucked out of the water the waves were then washing over the boat, which was now, the top of the deck was now in the water. So in that couple of minutes, minute, 2 minutes that we were away, the boat had well and truly - - -

Q15 Mmm.

A - - - started to sink. We went back up, oh, we then winched back up to the helicopter, pushed inside and we secured them. They had minor injuries, very hypothermic, the four of them, cuts, bruises and just beaten around a, a fair bit, and they were fairly elderly, elderly gentlemen. They were as happy as Larry to see us, very appreciative, and we went back to Mallacoota. Once we got back to Mallacoota Daryl again had to have a small break 'cause he was, not getting fatigued but he was cramped trying to just hold the machine steady. I was starting, still throwing up salt water, I'd ingested quite a bit. I suppose that winch took approximately 20 minutes to do. I was fatigued but I wasn't, wasn't tired as such, I was just, just fatigued from the amount of work that I'd just done. We got back there, they were checked out by ambulance officers and taken inside for the Red Cross. We were then tasked to go out and look for the B-52 again, so we refuelled and straight back out. We worked in conjunction with the A.B.C. helicopter and we actually used our, our beacon trackers, our homers which pick up

the E.L.T. emergency signals, and what we do is we home in on a, a pattern to locate this beacon. No one had spotted the yacht. We found it's beacon and it was obviously submerged, because of the power or the strength the signal was being admitted, oh, emitted to our instruments. We could pick it up on certain passes of this area and we had it confined down to about a 20 metre circle and there was nothing there, no debris, no life rafts, no nothing, there was just nothing in the water. While we concentrated on that the A.B.C. helicopter then started to do circuits around to see if he could pick up anything, nothing, so we either assumed that it was just below the surface or the boat had sunk, but there was no debris.

Q16 Mmm.

A At that stage I was becoming violently ill and obviously I wouldn't much good as a, a crewman on the, on the aircraft. We had a relief crew back at Mallacoota ready to change over so we then informed AUSAR that yes, the beacon was there, it was off B-52 but there was nothing in the water, no boat. As we were heading back into Mallacoota B-52 was actually located, I think by a Navy Orion, some 20 nautical miles north of that position, so it was right away from its beacon, so it's obviously the beacon's gone over -
- -

Q17 Mmm.

A - - - it's activated and then the boat's been washed, blown further up, up the coast. Got back to Mallacoota and changed over, put a, another fresh crewman in, rescue crewman in, Barry stayed as winch operator and Daryl stayed as the pilot. At that stage we didn't have a relief pilot, our relief pilot was at Merimbula Airport. At that stage they were then tasked to go and look for the B-52, sorry, the Winston Churchill. I think there were quite a number of fixed wing aircraft also doing search patterns looking for it. At this stage they took off and did their search area. Daryl will be able to give you more on that because I wasn't there.

Q18 Mmm.

A They then went to Mallacoota, picked up the next pilot, relief pilot, went back out to look for the B-52, sorry, the Winston Churchill, and that's when it came across that no one could find it and, 'cause at later, that's when they found it had sunk and the life rafts were found that, that night.

Q19 Mmm.

A And from there we were cancelled, because everyone that had to be rescued within our operating range had been done, we couldn't go out any further, Heli-Med 1 and South Care were about on their limit, the only thing left was really the Navy helicopters 'cause it's got the larger fuel tanks and had the better range, so they were now starting to take care of the outer areas,

which were about 100 and, sorry, 90, 90 nautical miles out to see. We were then told by AUSAR to, to finish up and we headed back to Melbourne on that, on that Monday night, and all very tired and relieved - - -

Q20 Mmm.

A - - - at the work we'd done, then we found out that some people had perished off the, off the Winston Churchill, which was a bit sad.

Q21 Mmm.

A But AUSAR I must say did a good job trying to coordinate everything. There were quite a number of fixed wing aircraft out there but the cloud base was such that all they could really do was pick up on the beacons and guide us because they couldn't see or get down low enough to get under the cloud base to actually do searching. The Navy Orions were fantastic. We actually had fixed wing top cover for us in case something happened to us, if we had to ditch, which was, which was good. I think it was just a fellow took it off his own bat to, to look after us.

Q22 Mmm.

A And he sort of stayed with us in and out as he was in a Nomad I think he was in, not a Nomad, a King Air, so we're thankful for him. To start with there was only the three rescue helicopters, Heli-Med 1, South Care and ourselves, and then on the Monday afternoon the Navy two helicopters and the Westpac from Newcastle came down, and I think the one, there was another one

from Sydney, I'm not quite sure if, I didn't see it 'cause they were operating out of Merimbula.

Q23 Mmm.

A There was only two operating out of Mallacoota which was Heli-Med 1 and ourselves, so everyone else was up north. So that's basically the - - -

Q24 O.K.

A - - - the story as it goes. So is there any questions at this stage?

Q25 Yeah. Now so far as communications are concerned with the boats, did you guys establish any communications with the boats at all?

A We tried to and just talking to the crews at Mallacoota, a lot of them, when the boats were rolled their equipment was just smashed to pieces, lost battery power, lost engines - - -

Q26 Mmm.

A - - - and they had no communications.

Q27 Right.

A All as they had were their E.L.T's, and that was the problem, that we couldn't communicate with them and we just had to play it by ear, which was the distress frequency which is 16, the only boat we really talked to was Kingara - - -

Q28 Right.

A - - - and I think they were lucky 'cause the Midnight Special just had no, no communications at all - - -

Q29 Mmm.

A - - - had none. The biggest thing I found out was that none of them had personal emergency beacons or E.L.T's - - -

Q30 Mmm.

A - - - so if they'd been washed into the water it was just a, a fluke that they would be found in those conditions, it was horrendous.

Q31 Mmm.

A How we found Campbell off the Kingara was just - - -

Q32 Mmm.

A - - - we were in the same trough he was, and that's when we found out later off the, off the crew that when they got rolled he actually, there was three or four of them got washed off and their safety harnesses overboard, climbed on. Peter Meakle actually tried to pull John Campbell out of the water, wasn't quite strong enough and he slipped out of his harness. We don't really know if Campbell took his equipment off or the water actually stripped him of his equipment. Because he was semi conscious most of the time he was, wasn't really forthcoming with information, he doesn't really know himself - - -

Q33 Mmm.

A - - - how or what happened. And that's I think what saved him as well - - -

Q34 Mmm.

A - - - because he wasn't struggling in the water, he was just sort of floating because of his semi conscious state - - -

Q35 Mmm.

A - - - and because he was a yachtie I think he knew what to do.

Q36 Mmm.

A He told us on the way back in that he didn't think he was gunna survive, and just talking to the crew they said he, they didn't think he'd survive either.

Q37 Mmm.

A He just had no equipment with him.

Q38 Mmm.

A So to this day we still don't know how he lost his equipment.

Q39 Did you guys, both those rescues off Kingara and Midnight Special, were they daylight, were they, or on the evening?

A The Kingara was on dusk - - -

Q40 Yeah.

A - - - and the, which was about 7.30pm on Sunday night - - -

Q41 Yeah.

A - - - the Midnight Special was at 8 o'clock the next morning - - -

Q42 Right.

A - - - which was bright daylight.

Q43 O.K. Now so far as this ditching discussion you blokes had, what was the, what was the main concern there, a fuel situation or weather or a combination?

A It was everything, everything that could be against a rescue - - -

Q44 Yeah.

A - - - was against us that day, which was the weather conditions, the water conditions, the lack of fuel, the lack of range in our, on our machine, the distance, just the, the bedlam on the radio, trying to work through all that, listen to everything that's going on and then conduct your winches at the same time.

Q45 Mmm.

A That was not annoying but you really need to concentrate when you're doing a rescue.

Q46 Mmm.

A One, one slip of your mind and - (Tape Beeping) - you know, you lose the machine and you lose the people, the person that's in the water. We had some problems with our own equipment or lack of proper equipment, that's been addressed now and we're now getting some better equipment. It takes something like this I think to wake everybody into a bit of reality to get better rescue equipment for us.

Q47 Mmm.

A The thing I found with the yachties was when they gave their locations, a lot of them then their equipment

failed, we were going to their, that area and we were unable to see them.

Q48 Mmm.

A The yachts were white, the water was white, visibility was poor and we really had to work hard to, to see them. The thing that did help the Kingara was that they fired a red flare, the normal red hand held flares, and if they'd fired a parachute flare we wouldn't have seen it 'cause it would have gone straight into the cloud, if they'd fired an orange smoke off, a hand held smoke, the wind would have just taken the smoke away, we wouldn't have seen it, but because it was so dull and dark, the red flare actually shone through the, the fog and the sea spray, so that was a big help.

Q49 Mmm.

A The colour of the yachts was a big thing, that was, everything was white, it was extremely hard to see them. Other rescue crews had the same problem as well.

Q50 Could you identify the yachts as far as their names at all?

A No, no, except for one yacht, Daydream I think it was called - - -

Q51 Right.

A - - - we spotted him and he was having a ball.

Q52 Right.

A He was as right as rain, he was having a ball, yet everything around him was just turning to worms.

Q53 Mmm. Want to suspend that? The time is 9.35. This interview is suspended for a tape change.

INTERVIEW SUSPENDED

INTERVIEW RESUMED

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q54 Electronic interview between Senior Constable David Key and Detective Senior Constable Gray continued. I think we were just discussing prior to that tape change, the colour of the hulls of the boats - - -

A Yes.

Q54 - - - in the white and that sort of thing, you had difficulty seeing that. Did you, or were you able to identify the names of any of the boats from your operations?

A No, no, we weren't, we couldn't get down low enough - - -

Q55 Yeah.

A - - - because of the wave heights, it was just too dangerous for us to get down that low.

Q56 Right.

A We did have our I.F.R. operational, we thought that may have been help, it would have helped us with our searching, but the weather conditions were just too atrocious and made that equipment virtually inoperative.

Q57 O.K. Now from the time you blokes were tasked from here or started work here until the time you got back, how many hours was it?

A Well, the first day it was 10.00 in the morning til,
this was Sunday?

Q58 Yeah.

A 10.00am in the morning til 11.00pm that night.

Q59 Yeah.

A And the next morning we started at 5.00 - - -

Q60 Yeah.

A - - - in the morning and we worked through til, I think
it was about, what time we got back here, 9 o'clock at
night. It was two fairly long - - -

Q61 Mmm.

A - - - long days.

Q62 Now yourself personally, I think you've mentioned that
you, you thought you were a goner in relation to when
you were hanging off the winch. Were there other times
during the operation where you felt the situation was
dangerous and to continue was sort of, well, a moral
sort of obligation rather than an operational
obligation?

A No, not really 'cause I think what, because of what was
happening around us - - -

Q63 Mmm.

A - - - and we could see the people in distress, if we
hadn't tried to rescue, tried to rescue them they would
have died, no question at all. Well, Campbell was only
minutes from dying - - -

Q64 Mmm.

A - - - 'cause he was going under the water, and as Barry will tell you, he saw him go under twice when I was going down the wire, so he was very, very close to death, and the four off the Midnight Special, they would have gone down with their boat.

Q65 Mmm.

A Their life jackets just weren't up to scratch and they just wouldn't have survived those conditions. They were absolutely on their last legs themselves because of the condition, the weather they've been through - - -

Q66 Mmm.

A - - - and when the boat, if the boat had sank they wouldn't have survived - - -

Q67 Mmm.

A - - - at all. So if you talk about the moral side of it, like, every, every rescue's got its element of danger - - -

Q68 Yeah.

A - - - but I think you just have to force, you're going down into the same situation as those people you're rescuing, so they need to be rescued 'cause they're in the shit - - -

Q69 Mmm.

A - - - and you're going down in that same spot, so you've got to force yourself through that - - -

Q70 Yeah.

A - - - situation and focus on the task that you're doing
- - -

Q71 Yeah.

A - - - to be able to perform the rescue.

Q72 So when does it become a situation of, this is too dangerous to rescue?

A It didn't, wasn't, it was horrendous, I don't think it was dangerous. It was dangerous because of the wire -
- -

Q73 Yeah.

A - - - and the situations you could have been put in, but if at any stage I thought it was too dangerous I would have just given the signal to be winched back up.

Q74 Yeah.

A And that's why I had a break on the Midnight Special, for that reason. If I'd gone back down to get that last fellow, I don't think, you know, I would have, wouldn't have had the physical strength to, to actually do the job properly - - -

Q75 Yeah.

A - - - so I had to have a break.

Q76 Yeah.

A Sure it was dangerous - - -

Q77 Yeah.

A - - - you know, because being forced under the water all the time - - -

Q78 Mmm.

A - - - and normally you're, you're held on the surface of the water by the wire which keeps you sort of buoyant, well, I wasn't buoyant, I was sinking all the time - - -

Q79 Mmm.

A - - - and that was the problem, so I was exerting a lot more energy - - -

Q80 Mmm.

A - - - than what I normally would in a rescue.

Q81 Mmm.

A And that was the problem too, and if we'd rescued any more, well, we couldn't have rescued any more because of the amount of weight that we can take on our machine, so four's about our limit.

Q82 Yeah.

A Heli-Med 1, they had, took eight I think it was, the first time. Well, I spoke to that rescue crewman afterwards and he was just absolutely shattered and had it, he just couldn't do anything, didn't have the energy to raise his arms - - -

Q83 Mmm.

A - - - and I was starting to head that way, so that's a big problem. None of us had encountered situations that we were put in on those 2 days before.

Q84 Mmm.

A Training can't cover you for that.

Q85 Mmm.

A You can only train on procedures and drills. Rescues, every rescue, as you'd know from the Water Police, has its own set of problems and things you have to sort of fight through, and if you don't rescue them, well, people are just going to die.

Q86 Mmm.

A And we were there to, to rescue them, that's, we had to do it.

Q87 you mentioned the word, I.F.R. flight. What does that mean?

A That means flying in the cloud. Normally a day like today, which is fairly clear, the pilots call it V.F.R, which is visual flight - - -

Q88 Yeah.

A - - - which means he can see what's out in front of him and there's no problems. When there's cloud you have to climb up above, 1,000 feet above your highest point to make sure that you don't bump into any hills, and that means that he's flying off instruments - - -

Q89 Right.

A - - - only, there's no visual flying, it's all off instruments, and we were lucky enough when we got to Mallacoota to come down through a hole in the cloud to actually land, 'cause if you can't see the ground you just can't land 'cause you don't know what's out there, so that's, that's high far flying when it's instrument flying.

Q90 Now yourself, you mentioned earlier that you got fairly crook with the ingestion of sea water. Did you recover from that fairly quickly?

A Yes. The first, the first night I was a little bit crook but on the, the second day after we finished with the Midnight Special I'd vomited a few times in the machine and when I got back, but once I sort of cleared the system out I was O.K. I was fairly nauseous but I was, I'd come good by that, by the Monday night.

Q91 Right. So far as when you rescue someone from the water, you mentioned that you put a, a ring around them, are you and the ring connected to the wire?

A Yes.

Q92 O.K.

A We never detach - - -

Q93 Yeah.

A - - - from the wire, unlike the U.S. Coast Guard who send a swimmer out into the water, we don't train like that. I'm attached to the wire and then that rescue strop is attached to the wire as well, it's on a hook - - -

Q94 Yeah.

A - - - at the bottom and I just simply slip the, the ring over the person, put their arms through the, the ring and then secure them and then go, go up to the helicopter.

Q95 If somebody was unconscious in the water and, would you use that strop?

A Yes, yes.

Q96 Can that strop, or will that strop support them if, if yourself and the person became sort of apart?

A Yes.

Q97 They could slip out of it?

A Not, we have a chest strap - - -

Q98 Yeah.

A - - - which is a, you put across the front of the person to secure them in. Because of the water conditions I was unable to put that - - -

Q99 Right.

A - - - securing strap on.

Q100 O.K.

A We are trained to put that on but the conditions just didn't allow it. We were just being thrown around like rag dolls and I was having trouble holding onto him because of his, he was unable to help me - - -

Q101 Yeah.

A - - - to help himself - - -

Q102 Yeah.

A - - - so all as you do is you put the harness over their, or the rescue strop over their head and shoulders, force their arms down beside their side and then you wrap your arms and legs around them so you're cuddling him - - -

Q103 Yeah.

A - - - hugging him as such. Because he was so slippery and semi conscious or almost unconscious at that stage, he was actually slipping through - - -

Q104 Yeah.

A - - - the harness, and of course when we had the winch freeze he, and the sudden jerk, that's when he was starting to, to really slip through, even though I had a hold of him - - -

Q105 Yeah.

A - - - there was a possibility that he could have slipped through.

Q106 Mmm.

A And the four off the Midnight Special, because of their life jackets, again I was unable to do the chest strap up but I was able to secure them sufficiently enough and put my hands through their life jacket to, to hold them.

Q107 O.K.

A There was no problem with them falling through, that wouldn't have happened, but with Campbell there was a problem.

Q108 O.K. Dave, you got any questions?

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

Q109 Whilst we're on life jackets, you mentioned earlier about the life jackets weren't up to scratch. What brings you to form that opinion?

A Just going on the life jackets that we have, the buoyancy jackets we, we have for passengers and that,

the RFD type 80 life jacket, which is the inflatable type, which keeps the head buoyant in the water and plenty of buoyancy around the chest area to keep the person above the water. The type of jackets that the Midnight Special crew had were, I'd say of the old type, they had just a thick foam, solid rigid foam blocks in them, which I don't think were suitable to that type of racing, and if you looked on the inside it actually stated that if it's in rough weather these won't, won't support you in the water. They were just very loose and, where the other type jackets fit you very snugly - - -

Q110 Mmm.

A - - - and even if you roll in the water it will roll back and keep your head out of the water - - -

Q111 Mmm.

A - - - automatically. So I thought that, that's why I said if they were, the boat sank and they were in the water they, they wouldn't have survived.

Q112 Mmm.

A Even when they were coming to me they were having trouble, their heads were sinking in the head hole of the actual jacket. The jacket was being buoyant but they weren't, because of all their heavy clothing on they were starting to sort of go under their, under their jacket, which, which was a bit of a problem. I don't think, I don't know if that's a, a standard type of life jacket that yachtsmen use but it just didn't

seem to be up to, to be able to handle those conditions.

Q113 Do you know if any of these life jackets had crutch straps at all?

A No, none, none of them did.

Q114 They were just basically around the waist and supported around the head and neck?

A Yeah.

Q115 O.K. And when you located the B-52, the emergency beacon that was going off on that, can you recall what frequency that was? Was that - - -

A 1-2-1-5.

Q116 It was the 1-2-1-5. Did you have any trouble with cross referencing beacons that might have been going off in close proximity to the instrumentation that you have on the helicopter?

A Yes. They were actually going, the instruments were going haywire, 'cause normally you, on a rescue you have one beacon going off and you can track to that one beacon, because there were beacons going off everywhere, and that was the big problem, all as we could do was go to the last location we were given, latitude and longitude, and then take out our searching or our looking from that area.

Q117 Mmm.

A We used our homer when we got down low enough in the water to actually try and do a triangulated sweep to make sure that yes, that's where it was, and we did

find the beacon in that area from the B-52 but no boat, and that was found about 40 nautical miles to the north, up towards Eden.

Q118 And when you left Mallacoota, were you given a weather briefing at all?

A Daryl may have been, the pilot. I can't say that, we just knew the weather was horrific.

Q119 Mmm.

A Just by listening to the air traffic that was going on we knew it was pretty, pretty terrible out there.

Q120 Mmm.

A How terrible we didn't know until we actually got out there.

Q121 Mmm.

A Just in, in, in hindsight, it wouldn't have really mattered because we had to go out there anyway - - -

Q122 Mmm.

A - - - so whether it was good, bad or indifferent. If it was that bad that we couldn't have done something the pilot would have turned around, that's something that we decide as a crew, no, that's it, we can't do this and we won't go on.

Q123 But as far as you were aware there was no conflict in the weather reportings that you'd be aware of?

A No, no. Daryl was talking to the aviation people so he'd probably be able to give you a better indicator of, of weather that he was given.

Q124 And very early on in the piece you mentioned that you heard the distress call from the Winston Churchill and you, it was quite eerie.

A Mmm.

Q125 Do you remember what time that was? Was that the first distress call that you'd heard from the Winston Churchill?

A It would have been, oh, Jeez, it was after we refuelled at, at Latrobe Valley, we were on our way down to Mallacoota, from there - - -

Q126 Just

A - - - it was after 6 o'clock, it would have been after 6 o'clock I think it was.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q127 On the 27th?

A On the 27th. Couldn't say for certain but I'd say, it was very chilling hearing that over the - - -

Q128 Mmm.

A - - - over the air.

Q129 O.K. Look, I see that you've prepared a list here of some ideas and views and opinions that you have in relation to future racing and that sort of thing which may assist blokes like yourself and helicopter crews that go out to these situations. You might like to go, go through that for us.

A O.K. The first one was the location of the yachts. We were given latitudes and longitudes but we weren't given decimals or seconds, we were just given degrees

and minutes, and that's a very large area to look at if you haven't got the, the pinpoint accuracy, as you know it's quite a few nautical miles. Well, in those conditions we could only see 100 metres, so what we were doing was just having to go in circular patterns, burning up valuable fuel - - -

Q130 Mmm.

A - - - to try and locate yachts, because that was their last position and of course the wind has moved them and the ocean has moved them to a different area, like Kingara was at least 2 kilometres away from where it was supposed to be, so in that sense a updated latitude and longitudes are very, very important if a boat's in distress, not just the Sydney to Hobart but any boat, to be able to be located quickly and to get people off. The colour of the yachts was a big problem, they were, most of the ones we saw were white and in those conditions they were just unrecognisable. So that was another, the problem. The number of persons on board ranged anything from nine to 12 to 15. Now to rescue that many people - - -

Q131 Yeah.

A - - - takes quite a, a lot of resources and that's why there was normally two helicopters or sometimes three allocated per, per yacht to pull the people off, and with 19 yachts in trouble, you know, you can only do so much.

Q132 Yeah.

A

So that was the, the other problem. The injuries, we need, if we are doing rescues we need to know what type of injuries the person has if possible, and they are normally the first ones, or they will be the first ones that are taken off, the persons that were injured. Out of the yacht race there were a lot of people with broken bones, ribs, things like, just by being thrown around when the yachts rolled over, and we have to try and adjust our, the way we rescue people to the type of injuries that they have. The yachts should be, if they can, be made more noticeable, by either putting coloured panels on them, putting some type of coloured orange, orange is a better colour, the safety orange, something that's gonna stand out more, that we can actually identify the yachts, because we couldn't get down low enough, we were just hoping that they were the right yachts that we, we were rescuing the people off because they were all in much the same, same area. The flares, they all carry flares, I think it might be an idea for people to carry a few more 'cause I think one of the T.V. documentaries, that one of the yachts was down to its last flare, I think it was Team Jaguar, they'd fired them off but no one had seen them and they were down to their last flare when they were spotted, so that may be another thing to be looked at, that they carry a good supply of flares, parachute flares and hand held red and orange flares. That's extremely important, is to be located and if they, if the Kingara

hadn't have fired off its hand held red flare and we spotted it, we would have had to clear because of our fuel, without even looking for the fellow because of the time taken to actually locate the yacht.

Q133 Mmm.

A The low cloud's a problem with the flares. The parachute flares, they'll just go into the cloud, we're not much good, we won't spot them, so the red ones in misty and foggy conditions, the red flares are better. Emergency locator beacons, even though the yachts had them some of the yachts were stripped of their beacons, as, as in the B-52, it had nothing to tell us where it was and yet it's beacon was 40 miles away, so that's, could be another problem, they may need back-up beacons on their boats. Personal emergency beacons, no one had any of those.

Q134 Mmm.

A You know, for a couple of hundred dollars, if you're washed off and you set that off, the satellite will find you and then we'll find you - - -

Q135 Mmm.

A - - - so that is another thing to look at, like the life rafts off the Winston Churchill, no one knew where they were, no, no emergency beacons. So that's perhaps another angle to look at. The life rafts that people used were completely inadequate for those conditions. They're called a tropical raft, which is just the one cell raft and the floor is in contact with the water.

If they were the big twin cell life rafts that are off the water, hypothermia mightn't have set in, and I don't know whether that would have helped in those weather conditions but if the weather conditions weren't so bad a big twin cell life raft may have been a lot more stable, as you know from the Water Police experience, but those ones were just being tossed around like confetti, they just had no, no support to hold them down, no, no heavy drags at the bottom or weights, and they were just being tossed around, but those weather conditions were out of the ordinary but under normal conditions I think you still need a good, a good life raft. Visible clothing is another thing, A lot of the yachties had dark blue type jackets and things like that and absolutely no good at all. You need orange, bright, even red's not a good colour but yellow, something, white's no good, it's got to be something that's going to stand out in your vision to be able to pick. That's why life rings and that are always orange - - -

Q136 Mmm.

A - - - so you can pick them up, so perhaps that's another thing to look at is the type of clothing. Types of rescues that are conducted, whether it be off a yacht, off a, out of a life raft, which a couple of the yachts did, or in the water, is basically up to the crews on how they can do it, because so much stuff was in the water and the waves were so big, it's not safe

for a crewman to go near the boats 'cause he'll just get tangled up or smashed to bits. So that, that's another thing to, that not having communications with the people, telling them what we were doing, but luckily enough hand signals were - - -

Q137 Mmm.

A - - - enough to, to get us through. I don't know how the other rescue group did, Heli-Med 1 and, they were lucky, they had with Stand Aside so they were lucky enough to be able to get them into their life raft and back.

Q138 Mmm.

A But the others would have had, would have had the same problems we had, and everybody was in the same boat, we were all taking, you know, the crewmen were taking in water, they were getting thumped around, so we were all, all copping it as bad as each other.

Q139 Anything else?

A No, that's about it.

Q140 point out to us, David?

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

No, nothing further.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q141 O.K. The time is now 9.59. This interview is concluded.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED