

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

- Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Detective Senior Constable Stuart Gray and Mr - (Tape Beeping) - Geoff Hedger at the Merimbula Police Station on Friday, the 9th of July, 1999. The time on my watch now is 6.40pm. For the purpose of the record, Geoff, could you please state your full name?
- A Geoffrey Phillip Hedger.
- Q2 Your date of birth?
- A 1st of December, 1927.
- Q3 And your current address?
- A 6 Casurina Place, Tura Beach.
- Q4 And your occupation at present?
- A I'm retired.
- Q5 O.K. And previous to retiring, what occupation were you in?
- A I've been involved in the land all my life and interested in the weather and I was also a supplier to the fishing industry of Eden for 12 years.
- Q6 Right. Now you've done some flying as well?
- A I've been an amateur pilot for a good many years and used to looking carefully at the weather.
- Q7 Right. O.K. Now as I've already explained to you, I'm making inquiries in relation to the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, and as a result of speaking to a person in Bega he mentioned your name about certain observations you made on the 26th of December, 1998 with your barometer. Is that correct?

A Yes. I, I always have a look at the barometer a couple of times a day.

Q8 Right.

A And at Christmas time the, the yacht race was on, I was particularly interested because the forecast had been made for a southerly change but they always get the southerly change on the yacht race anyway.

Q9 Mmm.

A It's either in the beginning or at the end, they always get it, but this day the, the barometric pressure was on my old scale at just under 30 inches and at 4 o'clock in the afternoon I tapped the glass and it had dropped dramatically from the, the midday, from the midday reading and it continued to drop until half past 5.00 and it had dropped a half an inch in that hour and a half, which is a fairly dramatic fall in the glass at that time of year. And I, I realised that there was a severe storm situation, where it was I can't tell that. But I said to my wife, Well, it's in Bass Strait and, and the glass has dropped and it's going to be a very, very severe storm. But I don't think anyone saw it from, I can't find out anywhere, I've spoken to Coast Patrol at Eden and people that should have known, and I can't, I, I just don't think that the drop was seen by, by Coast Patrol and other people involved because I think it was the time of day.

Q10 Mmm.

A It was, you know, Boxing Day after Christmas.

Q11 Mmm.

A And the yacht race was in progress. That reading would not have shown on a glass north of, north of Bermagui, I don't think.

Q12 Right.

A And, and, and it would be very interesting to see if there was any record at, at some of the southern points, perhaps the oil rigs or people that were interested in, in the weather pattern, to have a recorded record of the barometric pressure for that day.

Q13 Mmm. O.K. Now what type of barometer is the one that you

A This is an ordinary one, it's only got inches on it instead of the, of the metric - - -

Q14 Right.

A - - - 10.2, 10.4 that you use on aircraft now to set the altitude - - -

Q15 Right.

A - - - meter.

Q16 Now what does it mean when the barometer drops?

A It only means that the pressure centre's deepening, the pressure centre has deepened.

Q17 And what does that mean?

A It's like a cyclone, it begins to turn faster.

Q18 Right. O.K. Now when you say it dropped - - -

A It means that, it means that the circulation's begun to, to circulate at a higher speed.

Q19 Yeah.

A So your wind speeds are gunna be higher.

Q20 Right.

A And you have a storm situation.

Q21 Right. And the lower it falls does that mean - - -

A The more intense.

Q22 The more intense?

A The more intense.

Q23 O.K. Well, from information that I've received the
lowest recording that I have been informed about was
988 on the, on the barometer.

A Yes. But this one would have been much lower than
that.

Q24 Do you think so?

A Yeah.

Q25 Significantly lower than that?

A I would think so, probably about, probably about .4 or
5, .4.

Q26 Now does that indicate cyclonic conditions in your
mind?

A Almost.

Q27 Right.

A Almost.

Q28 Yeah.

A See, the cyclone on the north-west circulated at
something below 29 on my, on the which is 9.8 - -
-

Q29 Mmm.

A - - - or something like that.

Q30 Right.

A 9.8, 9.7.

Q31 And it was about lunch - - -

A It was 4 o'clock when I - - -

Q32 4 o'clock when you checked?

A 4 o'clock when I checked it again. I, I'd given it a tap in the morning and the glass was low - - -

Q33 Mmm.

A - - - so it indicated a front.

Q34 Mmm.

A And I tapped it again at 4 o'clock and it was a dramatic drop and it continued to drop. I checked it every, every quarter of an hour.

Q35 Mmm.

A And, until it stopped dropping at half past 5.00.

Q36 Mmm. Where would the yachts have been do you think - - -

A North of Bermagui.

Q36 - - - at that stage?

A North of Bermagui.

Q37 The lead yacht would have been?

A You see, they, they, they'd only started at lunch time.

Q38 2 o'clock, 1 o'clock.

A Yeah. Yeah. So they would be virtually only at Wollongong at the most.

Q39 Mmm. So what are your views in relation to that intense - - -

A I just think that it's, that perhaps the, the, the warning was there but it hadn't been, no one had seen it.

Q40 Mmm.

A Because of, of Christmas and, but it may not, it may not. There might be no record of it.

Q41 Yeah. There was a storm warning issued at 14.00 hours on the 26th. Had - - -

A That's - - -

Q42 In Sydney.

A 14.00 is, what - - -

Q43 2 o'clock.

A 2 o'clock.

Q44 2.00pm, which would be an hour after the race.

A Mmm.

Q45 Now the storm warning was issued. Do you think that the reading on your barometer would be more indicative of a severe storm.

A At lunch time it would have only been indicative of a normal southerly, a severe southerly change.

Q46 Change?

A Yeah.

Q47 And at 4.00pm?

A Because of the shape of the high and the wind direction it looked as though it was gonna be a fairly severe change.

Q48 Right. Right.

A But the glass indicated it depended dramatically after that.

Q49 Yeah.

A After 5.00, after 4 o'clock.

Q50 Yeah. Now as far as these winds are concerned, from, how long have you been in this area for?

A Oh, I've been here in Merimbula and Eden for about 15 years.

Q51 O.K. Now from your experience are you able to sort of tell me - - -

A I lived in Cooma district for, all my life before that.

Q52 Right.

A So we see the southerly changes fairly dramatically up there - - -

Q53 Yeah.

A - - - as well as here.

Q54 Yeah. Would you then explain to me if you're aware the situation with the southerly that happens or that occurs off the south-east coast?

A Well, the southerly buster's severity depends on the shape of the, of the high pressure centre. Because if the high pressure centre is elongated on the, across the southern half of Australia you get a westerly wind flow.

Q55 Right.

A But if it's elongated north and south you get a very severe, when you get a rise in the barometer you get a

very severe southerly wind blowing straight up from, from Tasmanian waters and northwards.

Q56 Right.

A But that's also accentuated by the front - - -

Q57 Yes.

A - - - that's, that's circulating in, in southern waters.

Q58 Right. Now what about the waters around those areas? I mean have you got much experience with the seas there?

A Oh, yes, the, the fishermen from Eden are always wary of southerly changes and the, the high seas that can erupt down there on a southerly change just in a matter of a few, an hour or two.

Q59 Mmm.

A And when you hear the deckhands talking on a 100 foot trawler that they're not game to open the door and take a photo because they're looking up at the - - -

Q60 Mmm.

A - - - it is a really, it is probably one of the worst sailing areas in the world.

Q61 Mmm.

A It's almost as bad as the Horn. Because of the shallow water in Bass Strait which stirs up quickly - - -

Q62 Yeah.

A - - - on, on southerly changes you, when you get, the fishermen tell me when you get shallow water you get really rough water.

Q63 Mmm.

A Like the bar at the sea at the entrance to the lake and, but down there in Bass Strait it's much more dramatic.

Q64 Mmm. Mmm. So - - -

A It's known as a very treacherous area.

Q65 Yeah. Now these fronts that come through that area they're a regular - - -

A They're a pattern, they're a pattern about every 6 days.

Q66 O.K.

A Though you'll get a stiffening of the wind for 3 or 4 days after a change because of the little fronts coming into circulation, the major changes occur about every 6 days.

Q67 Right.

A So it's, it's, you're always going to have to contend with it. If you're going to Bass Strait you, you, you have to beware of the fronts and the changes. The, the yachties always play a cat and mouse game with the changes. To get, there's 90 miles between Gabo and around the corner to get to Welshpool and it's very open water and it's very treacherous if a southerly change catches you out in that open water because there's no shelter, there's nowhere to go.

Q68 Mmm.

A You see, there were no, no little nooks or crannies once you went past Lakes, there was nowhere, once you

leave Gabo there's nowhere you can go til you get down to Cape Everard or somewhere like that and that's about 90 miles.

Q69 Mmm. So from your point of view do you think that that should be looked at more closely in future races.

A Oh, look, they're aware of it.

Q70 Mmm.

A They're all aware of it.

Q71 Mmm.

A I just think they didn't know - - -

Q72 Mmm.

A - - - this time the depth of the depression that was, that was, the storm that was involved in the change of wind.

Q73 Mmm. Mmm.

A And there was no way unless they were told, unless there was some record and that's why I've brought to your notice the, the barometric pressure change at my place.

Q74 Mmm.

A Because I think it should have been recorded at Welshpool or Gabo or somewhere else. Whether they've got that sort of recording equipment on the ship - - -

Q75 Yeah.

A - - - no one seems to know, but the Coast Patrols don't have it, they only note the barometric pressure change and give a reading in the morning - - -

Q76 Right.

A - - - in their weather report in the morning.

Q77 Right.

A The, as far as I know the co-op at, at Eden that give a weather do a weather sched every hour. They don't give the glass reading, though, I don't think, they only just give the forecast and wind direction.

Q78 Right. Mmm. O.K.

A But it's still a very important, it's still a very important part of a fisherman's life - - -

Q79 Mmm.

A - - - and the yachtie's life, Bass Strait.

Q80 Yeah.

A You know, once they, once they leave Eden to go to Bass Strait they know that they're in dangerous water.

Q81 Mmm.

A All the experienced yachtsmen know they're in really dangerous, they're in dangerous waters.

Q82 Yeah. Yeah. O.K. Is there anything else that you'd like to add or say?

A No, I just, I just think it was a very sad day.

Q83 Mmm.

A Mmm. I didn't, I didn't think of saying anything about it because I thought that it would come out.

Q84 Mmm.

A But it hasn't, that the glass had dropped so much and you're, you're having an inquest into what had happened and - - -

Q85 Mmm.

A - - - the inquiry, I didn't, I thought the inquiry would have brought it out.

Q86 Mmm.

A That the barometric pressure had dropped dramatically, but there was nothing about that in the inquiry.

Q87 Have you read the report have you?

A No. No. Just only - - -

Q88 Yeah.

A - - - we only heard about this, but it didn't seem that there was any, there was any mention of that.

Q89 Yeah.

A They certainly found themselves mixed up in a storm all right.

Q90 Yeah.

A But I don't think they got any real prior warning of it.

Q91 Yeah. Yeah. O.K.

A And I don't say it's anybody's fault but - - -

Q92 No. No. I - - -

A - - - I think it was probably an oversight and perhaps there's no, perhaps there was no really, there was no real attempt to keep an eye on that glass for the period.

Q93 Mmm.

A You know, constantly, because a holiday, don't forget it's Christmas and Boxing Day.

Q94 Mmm.

A And everyone's doing the minimum of sort of effort except the blokes on the yachts.

Q95 Mmm. Well, from your experience just, if the fleet were aware that there was a severe storm south of Eden
- - -

A I think if they had known what it entailed they wouldn't have, I think they'd have hove to off Gabo or something like that.

Q96 Mmm.

A I don't think they'd have, although there was, there was some of them, there was some of the boats that, that got through before the thing got really bad, you know, before - - -

Q97 Yeah.

A - - - it got really bad. There was some of those boats that were able to handle anything.

Q98 Yes.

A You know, they, they just ploughed on irrespective but the older boats and some of the more inexperienced boats certainly - - -

Q99 Mmm. Had they known about - - -

A I think it's very sad about the, the performance of the life boats.

Q100 Mmm.

A The life rafts.

Q101 We're looking into that.

A Because I had a boat and I had a life raft on board and always thought, Well, that'll save you, you know, don't worry about the weather.

Q102 Yeah.

A You know, if you have to take the life raft that'll be all right.

Q103 Yeah. Yeah. O.K.

A But you never suspected that they'd, they'd tip over and that you didn't have, you really didn't have a chance in that sort of weather.

Q104 Yeah.

A But that's the sort of weather you'd be taking the life boat.

Q105 Mmm. That's right.

A Mmm.

Q106 O.K.

A Right.

Q107 So the time by my watch now is 6.54pm, this interview is now concluded.

A Good.

Q108 I'll just give you a copy of this, mate.

A Righto.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED