

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Detective Senior Constable Stuart Gray and Mr Lou Abrahams at the Victorian Water Police in St Kilda on Sunday, the 18th of April, 1999. Also present and seated directly, directly opposite me is Senior Constable David Upston from the New South Wales Water Police. The time by my watch now is 10.23am. Mr Abrahams, just for the record, could you please state to me your full name?

A Louis Joshua Abrahams.

Q2 Your date of birth?

A The 10th of 8th, '27.

Q3 And your current address?

A Number 4 St Ninians Road, Brighton.

Q4 O.K. And your occupation?

A Company director.

Q5 O.K. Now as we've already explained to you, Senior Constable Upston and myself are making inquiries in relation to the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, and we've been tasked by the Coroner to speak to a number of people who were involved with that race. And in the, your case today, as the owner of Challenge Again who competed in the race last year. But firstly if I could just get some background sailing experience from you?

A Yes. Perhaps if I could just start me, I gave you the 27th - - -

Q6 Yes.

A - - - as the time, it was the evening of the 26th - -
-

Q7 O.K.

A - - - at 22.30.

Q8 O.K.

A A man overboard at that time.

Q9 O.K.

A I, my experience in yachting goes back, I guess, over 40 years, nearly 50 years, I guess. But mainly from ocean racing and club racing from dinghies through to, I've been ocean racing for the last, I suppose you'd say 38 to 40 years, starting in my own boat and, was the old Winston Churchill which sadly is no more, did my first Hobart on that. And I've then raced in every Sydney Hobart for the last 36 years. I've, I think it's six Admiral's Cup series, representing Australia in three of them. Kenwood Cup series, which was originally the Pan Am series. Each one of those, which I think is about eight times, they have it bi-annually. And I guess most other ocean races around Sydney Suvas, around Tasmania. So, yeah, I've spent a lot of time yachting.

Q10 All right.

A A lot of my spare time yachting.

Q11 O.K. Now the boat that you entered in the 1998 Sydney to Hobart was in fact called Challenge Again?

A Challenge Again, yes.

Q12 Could you give me some details of that boat?

A That is a Bashford 41, designed by Ian Murray and his group, Ian Murray & Associates, I should say. It's a 41 foot cruiser racer. My first breaking out from a racing boats for a number of years to a cruiser racer.

Q13 Mmm.

A And it's a fast cruiser racer. Very solidly constructed and not quite so competitive in the, or the I.M.S. rating now, but compared to the channel handicap situation. It's well fitted, strong. Certainly this last Sydney Hobart showed it was very strong. I believe some of the things that I had done to the boat after I bought it were perhaps beneficial and one of them was the baby stay, I, I shifted that from the deck, a deck fitting, which was under a bulk, bulkhead, but which in my opinion was not good enough because of the steep angle, shifted that forward and put a D ring on the deck and then a D ring underneath down to the keel. A point very strongly, I think, that probably was a saviour in a mast situation in conditions like we had.

Q14 Mmm.

A Certainly it may have, I say it may have been, I'm only speculating, the hullthat B-52, which was rolled, I don't know, it would be interesting to know whether they had brought their baby stay down to the keel of the boat, because if not, I'm sure that in a roll situation you could pull the deck off the boat or

damage the deck pretty severely. I'm to, I mentioned that to the, the Bashford's boat builders after the Sydney Hobart as a thing they should watch. But whether that's the case or not, I don't know with that boat, but certainly, there are a number of things on boats, I guess from years of experience, that you do to them - - -

Q15 Mmm.

A - - - that are beyond what a boat builder may do.

Q16 Mmm.

A And that was just one of them.

Q17 Now pass those records now, Challenge Again was entered in 9S last year - - -

A For this - - -

Q18

A No, we were entered in the Channel Handicap division.

Q19 Right. O.K. then.

A a current I.M.S. certificate.

Q20 Yeah. This is the one you used last year?

A Yes.

Q21 And you agree that the stability index is 121.3?

A Yeah, that's what I measured.

Q22 And the calculated limit of positive stability is 119.8?

A That's right.

Q23 O.K. And you're aware of the stability requirements for a Category 1 Ocean Race?

A I've forgotten what they are, but I understand we're well within.

Q24 If I was to tell you it was 115 - - -

A Yeah.

Q24 - - - would that sort of - - -

A That would be probably - - -

Q25 Right. O.K. Now the crew that were on your yacht - --

A Yes.

Q26 I'll just show you a crew list. If you could just have a quick look - - -

A Yeah.

Q26 - - - at that. Is that in fact the crew that sailed with you last year?

A It would be the crew list, yes. Yeah, that's the one.

Q27 O.K. Now you mentioned that you were in the Admiral's Cup on a number of occasions - - -

A Mmm.

Q28 Were you involved in the Fast Net in '79?

A I was manager of the team that year.

Q29 Oh, O.K. Is there anything interesting you can tell us about that?

A Um - - -

Q30 From an experience point of view, or - - -

A Well I had, I guess occasion to have a friend who was conducting the inquiry and Sir Maurice Lane who was Commodore at the time, and we, some years previously shared the design of a boat, and I had a yacht called Victoria and we both shared

-
Stephen's design, so he invited me to listen in on some of the questioning. And I thought it was, it was extremely interesting that, that the difficulties associated with rescuing someone in helicopters - - -

Q31 Mmm.

A - - - in bad conditions and I came to the conclusion the ones that stayed to their boats were obviously, where they were unfortunate enough in not being able to be lifted off, were all saved next day. When you looked around the next day the yachts were all floating around happily with their hatches open, sails dragging over the sides of them and, and the yacht survived. The crew didn't.

Q32 Mmm.

A And really there was two parts of the inquiry. The one was that they, they would call the helicopter and come over and - - -

Q33 O.K.

A - - - you wanted to be taken, taken off, you need to inflate your life raft, get in the raft and get some distance away from the yacht before we can pick you up. And, you know, a helicopter can only pick up so many people - - -

Q34 Mmm.

A - - - per unit, per whatever it was, and after 15 minutes in the water these people, most of them could go out on hypothermia.

Q35 Mmm.

A So the efficient rescue service, in some ways, was the cause of a lot of loss of life. Now nothing like it in this case. I think in this case they did it well - - -

Q36 Mmm.

A - - - did it unbelievably, unbelievably well, but I always came away with the feeling that, well if they hadn't had this very great, efficient system - - -

Q37 Mmm.

A - - - a lot of people would be alive - - -

Q38 Mmm.

A - - - because they just, they'd jump in the life rafts and the life rafts were just being tumbled over and people's around the water and suddenly you've got six or eight people in the water and you could not pick them all up - - -

Q39 Yeah.

A - - - within the given time. It was a pretty violent type of seaway, probably no more violent, maybe not as violent as what we had for a short time in these conditions. But that was somewhat different, in that there were far more inexperienced people sailing the, the Fast Net Race has always been a, let's go for a jolly - - -

Q40 Mmm.

A - - - each year in the Cowe's week - - -

Q41 Mmm.

-
A - - - 'cause they, there was virtually very little, we complained about the fact there was, almost no safety inspection. You know, if you've got all the gear you require, yes, well - - -

Q42 Mmm.

A - - - they didn't want to know any more about it.

Q43 Mmm.

A So it's hard to put, like, with, like, there was more inexperience there. There was, a family were going out for their sail and when the weather gets bad you just go into this port or that port, pretty easily - - -

Q44 Mmm.

A - - - 'cause there's a lot of places you could go in.

Q45 Mmm.

A And you weren't sort of left alone, like, out on Bass Strait. So, but it's always a, it's always a stark reminder, never get in your life raft unless you really have to - - -

Q46 Mmm.

A - - - most boats will look after themselves - - -

Q47 Mmm.

A - - - and continue to float.

Q48 Mmm. Now in your experience with all the sailing that you've done around the world in the various waters, how do you, how would you rate Bass Strait so far as waters of the world?

A I think Bass Strait's probably among the roughest - - -

Q49 Mmm.

A - - - that I've had occasion to be in and yes, you've got to treat it with great respect.

Q50 Mmm.

A It gets pretty rough, because you've got a fairly strong tidal set - - -

Q51 Mmm.

A - - - running south and it goes in patches. One of the things which would be an interesting thing to look at is the infra-red photographs of the, of that tidal stream at the time we were all in it. I think it would be a most interesting picture. They must have that. And, because we were measuring 4 knots south as we went into this very nasty rough seas, and yet boats that were away from the group that struck it, and not that many miles, were in much better conditions.

Q52 Mmm.

A And that's how the winning yacht somehow or other missed these, these tidal surge when you're racing down the coast, like, if you were to get in one that's going south, or suddenly you run into one that's running north, someone's passing you at 3 mile, 4 mile away from you, who are just walking past you, 2 or 3 knots quicker.

Q53 Mmm.

A It's very frustrating race in that regard - - -

Q54 Mmm.

A - - - because you can't visibly see, well should I be left or right - - -

Q55 Mmm.

A - - - til you see someone going faster than you.

Q56 Mmm.

A And you don't often see them in the night time.

Q57 Mmm.

A But it makes for, you get a south, southerly sou'westerly, it makes for a very very nasty sea.

Q58 Mmm.

A And, you know, it's, wind against tide is a pretty ugly - - -

Q59 Mmm.

A - - - sort of sea condition. So, yeah, Bass Strait can be - - -

Q60 Mmm.

A - - - pretty, pretty wild there.

Q61 Now knowing what we all know now in relation to the boats that got rolled over and where there were deaths, where deaths occurred and, and in some cases where they, where they didn't occur would you, from your experience, put that down to, well actually in this race, put that down to sort of bad luck? I mean, being hit by those waves, random waves - - -

A I think - - -

Q61 - - - wrong place, wrong time?

A Yeah. Probably bad luck would be, would be a fair part of it. I think that was clearly a case for putting your best helmsman on the job - - -

Q62 Mmm.

A - - - and the most experienced helmsman. The best helmsman may not necessarily be a, a gold medal helmsman - - -

Q63 Mmm.

A - - - the best helmsman is one that's had a fair amount of ocean, hard ocean racing - - -

Q64 Mmm.

A - - - experience.

Q65 Mmm.

A Because the conditions were pretty critical to being able to steer it. You could lose it broached

Q66 Mmm.

A broached pretty easily and that's how Skippy went - - -

Q67

A - - - overboard. It was just a, and the conditions weren't that severe - - -

Q68 Mmm.

A - - - at that stage by any means. I think we had about, we had a, when we rolled over there we had about 20, 27 knots of, to, to 30 knots of breeze - - -

Q69 Mmm.

-
A - - - so you've it was just, whether it was a,
the sea came in from a quarter just really broached us
- - -

Q70 Mmm.

A - - - at the wrong time. It was building up at that
time - - -

Q71 Mmm.

A - - - and, but yeah, I'd say it's, it's a case of your
best helmsman - - -

Q72 Yeah.

A - - - when it got really bad, to just keep it - - -

Q73 Mmm.

A - - - on track.

Q74 Mmm.

A I guess that's why we headed off and determined that
well sheltering might be easier as it was, we were not
goin' to handle the night time when you couldn't see
it.

Q75 Mmm.

A And prudent to have gone back. Although to say that
we, I considered whether it was safer going forward
than back and as it turned out some of these yachts
that went back did get into trouble.

Q76 Mmm.

A I think we were probably pretty close to the eye of
things and the fax, weather fax going, and the low was
sort of sitting off Flinders Island pretty stationary,
the barometer had gone just about as far as it was

going to go and we needed to either go through it and come out the other side or go back. But I determined going back might have been the safer sea conditions, but on going back I'm not really totally sure it was -

- -

Q77 Mmm.

A - - - the safest way to go - - -

Q78 Mmm.

A - - - from where we were.

Q79 Mmm.

A But it's interesting if you look around the area where we were, this has got nothing to do with Skippy going overboard, because he went overboard off Montague, just south of Montague. You've probably seen the position, the positioning there is quite interesting as to where the boats were. We were, we were off Montague and there's a 3.00am position, we were back here when Skippy went over. There was a fair southerly running and see Winston Churchill and those boats - - -

Q80 Yeah.

A - - - behind us there. But as he come, we lost a bit of ground and as we came down here Challenge Again, B-52 and Sword of Orion all in this area where we got some pretty - - -

Q81 Mmm.

A - - - nasty conditions and they were all suffering pretty badly at that point.

Q82 Mmm.

A And it's quite interesting that you get those areas that are, where you take a beating and there were, you know, there were definitely swirls of, of As I say, if you can get hold of that - - -

Q83 Yeah.

A - - - chart it might be an interesting one to do. I think it does show the groups of boats that got into trouble - - -

Q84 Yeah.

A - - - how Winston Churchill and Kingura were about that far apart - - -

Q85 Mmm.

A had - - -

Q86 Mmm.

A - - - given. So - - -

Q87 Mmm. Yeah. Mmm. O.K. If I could take you to, it was around the, around 22.30 on the 26th which would be Sunday.

A Yeah.

Q88 Sunday? Saturday?

A Saturday.

Q89 Right. If you could just sort of talk to us about, leading up to that incident where Gary Shipper went overboard?

A Yeah. Well I don't know whether you read the stuff I sent to the Cruising Yacht Club about the, what I did after this happened I, when we got to Hobart I asked our crew to write a, a report on what happened as

they see it, because they, you're either down below - -

-

Q90 Mmm.

A - - - and something, and as I was down below when it actually happened, and the situation was probably, probably the people accounted, each wrote a, an account of that which I sent to the Cruising Yacht Club which no doubt you have. And I think it was of what, and it shows where everyone was - - -

Q91 Mmm.

A - - - and what happened and I probably can't add to it a lot, other than the fact that as soon as someone called, Man overboard. I happened to be below and we did broach fairly quickly and I got thrown back. My cabin from the navigation table and I heard, Man overboard and my only objective at that stage was to press the Man overboard button Brooks & Gatehouse and hold it for 3, 3 seconds which you need to do to fix the position. And that's a long 3 seconds.

Q92 Mmm.

A So I sort of said, One thousand, two thousand, three thousand. It seemed like forever, and, and I was concentrating on that, then I thought, I've got to concentrate on the chart so I pressed the Event button which gives you an immediate position. The positions were so close it didn't matter in any case, 'cause apparently when you press the Man overboard

button Brooks & Gatehouse, it starts from that point where you've got to hold it 3 seconds.

Q93 All right.

A But I concentrated on that first of all then put 'em up the, the course and direction to the man overboard and that was the main thing that I did while the crew on deck, I feel very, most competent, Colin Anderson was steering at the time and Fraser Johnson was, was rushed to the, next to him, take the motor controls and Richard Grimes who's an F18 pilot, navigator, he's a very competent sort of guy, he just, well how threw one belt and torch over. But as it turned out Skippy had one with him, and then they put another torch on him. So we had him spotted virtually to almost when he splashed - - -

Q94 Mmm.

A - - - and the bugger's thrown up into the wind and the crew tied the and the main down. The motor was started up. I started calling the course and direction. But I haven't got a loud vice and I, got Andy Telford who's one of the crewmen to call out. I got up the top and, by that time we had the life sling out and, and Skippy was well spotted. The time he was in the water was probably, on my log, was probably a guess, you know, we were more anxious in getting so take 5 minutes off. I thought well I'd better report, record that. I recorded it when how went over was clear because I did two things, as soon as he

went overboard, I radioed the relay vessel immediately and by the time that finished then things were happening.

Q95 Mmm.

A And the life sling's a great exercise, but it's, I don't know whether you know the life slings that are used, but they're, that's a life sling for, for the boat. One of the interesting things is, 'cause it works great like this with a guy when his arms down like that.

Q96 Mmm.

A Skippy, like any man that's in trouble's gunna, had a hold of the top part like the, where the lifelines and wasn't goin' to let it go - - -

Q97 Mmm.

A because it's, the lifeline's, the, the sling just slides up over your back.

Q98 Mmm.

A So unless you keep your arms down it's, it starts to slide off your back and that was, that was a difficulty and in, in handling it. And that's, that's the unit that we have on the boat. It's very good. Certainly you can pick up a man pretty easily in the water - - -

Q99 Yeah.

A - - - but, and we lifted, we'd reached, finally got Skippy's arms down and put him on the halyard winch and winched him straight up and swang him across straight down below to the cabin

Q100 Yeah

A - - - and one of the lads started pulling his clothes
 off and then we were tryin' to get him warm - - -

Q101 Yeah.

A - - - straight away there. So suddenly I thought, I'd
 better record the time and I deducted about 5 minutes
 off until the whole exercise had been - - -

Q102 Mmm.

A - - - about 10 minutes.

Q103 Mmm.

A But - - -

Q104 How far had he got from the boat when you saw that he
 went over?

A Oh, I don't think it would be, I don't think it would
 be more than 30 or so metres. I mean the boat just
 went straight up into the wind - - -

Q105 Yeah.

A - - - and almost fell back on him.

Q106 Yeah. Oh, that's good.

A It was pretty, you know, it was well handled - - -

Q107 Mmm.

A You know the helmsman, Fraser Johnson, grabbed hold of
 the controls, Col steered and Grimesie was calling him,
 keeping the torch going, and getting a torch back.

Q108 Mmm.

A So Gary Grimes grabbed hold of the life sling, put it
 around the side to Rohan who, young guy there, and they

were gunna cast it adrift and, but as we were coming round you know, virtually, threw it over him.

Q109 Yeah. Oh, that's good. So did have a set routine for man overboard or was it something - - -

A Yes.

Q109 - - - that happened - - -

A No, no, we had a set routine. I've, we, before we, you know, I've got a crew that have sailed with me many times - - -

Q110 Mmm.

A - - - but before we left Sydney Harbour we sort of went over in one corner in the harbour and sat down and went through - - -

Q111 Mmm.

A - - - the lifesaving routine.

Q112 Mmm.

A The safety gear on, on board the boat we've got a, a list of where all the safety gear is, went through it all - - -

Q113 Mmm.

A Went through the jobs of who, who's doing which jobs on the boat, and it's well worth the, the gadget, it's certainly, they're worth having on the boat.

Q114 Mmm.

A But around here we have a, you know, everyone's crew position amongst all the information somewhere. It's the crew position, the, what they do on a yacht and in an emergency who does what. It's, it's pretty well

-
documented for everyone as they, they step on board,
because it's, you don't want to be teaching 'em when
you're - - -

Q115 No.

A - - - starting to, to race.

Q116 And how - - -

A

Q116 - - - was his spirits after that?

A Oh, he was pretty good actually. He - - -

Q117 Yeah.

A - - - sat down below. They sort of tucked him down
below and he, they got him gradually dry and clothes
off and blankets over him and he laid in the of
the boat, you know, How do you feel? And we pull
out now? He said, No, no, no. I'm all right. And
then later on he got in the aft bunk area and virtually
stayed there until we pulled into Eden. I said, Well
you know, we're coming to Eden, I want to, I want to
finish the race but, you know, no worries if you get
off the boat, no good you pushing yourself. But very
determined he wanted to race on.

Q118 Yeah.

A If the boat goes, I go - - -

Q119 Yeah

A - - - sort of thing, so, and I guess when we left Eden
like, what we did, we went into, we didn't go into Eden
itself, we went into the bay opposite the, the hotel
down there and dropped anchor. It was somewhere round

2 o'clock or whenever it was, and had a decent meal, we all went to bed, woke up early in the morning said, Well the weather looks better, let's go. And I said, Well, we'd used fuel coming back to Eden. I found it was safer to go in with bare poles with the motor going as you had enough speed to steer the boat and the storm headsail on, we thought it was too big and better safety, just motor sail it, and so we went back in. I wasn't going to go on the pier with other boats because if you tie up on the pier you know the boat's not gunna go again. Yachties get together, all have a beer and - - -

Q120 Mmm.

A - - - get up to stories, so we decided we weren't gunna do that, said well, well we need some fuel and under the regulation, because we used the motor for safety, we could top up our fuel tank to, to the qualifying category 1 requirement. So we just pulled up to the pier, a couple of the guys went up and got a couple of drums of fuel, tipped 'em in, started the motor up and went again. But I've got to say, going out of Eden, because of really the nervousness of the crew and I was very cautious. Went out with a couple of reefs we shook another reef out, another reef. By the end of the day we were sailing happily and everyone was more than happy that we finished the race. You start a race you want to finish it, safely, but you want to finish it. And it turned out, I think, from Skippy's point of

view, about the best thing we could have done. It's, as I said, because it's like falling off a horse, you want to get straight back on and - - -

Q121 Yeah.

A - - - get going. So, yeah, he was happy to have completed the race and not been one of the many that - - -

Q122 Mmm.

A - - - unfortunately pulled out.

Q123 Did he display, did he display any signs of exhaustion being in the water? Do you recall?

A He was pretty exhausted when he - - -

Q124 Yeah

A - - - came out, yes. Yes, he - - -

Q125 Mmm.

A - - - was, he was saying, well he was pretty buggered - - -

Q126 Yeah,

A - - - by the time he got out, yeah.

Q127 Now so far as going into Eden, was that a decision based on what happened to him?

A No, not necessarily. But I guess it's, my intention was to probably get in behind Gabo, but we would have been blown off there and it was gunna be a hard

Q128 Mmm.

A - - - to get back in there, and I spoke to Ulladulla Coast Guard. They said, Yeah, you can, but it's not

that good and understand there's some other boats in there and from having been there some years ago - - -

Q129 Mmm.

A - - - it wasn't going to be easy, so I said, Well O.K. another 25, 30 mile, we won't go right to, won't go right into Eden, we'll just go round the corner - - -

Q130 Mmm.

A - - - under the woodchip - - -

Q131 Mmm.

A - - - area there and anchor there. So we weren't gunna lose a lot because we'd been pushed out to sea a bit - - -

Q132 Yeah.

A - - - and getting to Gabo was going to be fairly hard.

Q133 Yeah. Now so far as, so you left Eden around what time on the 27th?

A I know it was before lunch. We headed off 2.45 I the morning, 2.27 and left Eden at 12 o'clock midday.

Q134 On the 28th?

A Yeah.

Q135 O.K. Now so far as the storm was concerned, did you suffer any, suffer any of that storm at all? I mean, did you - - -

A Oh, we suffered it, but it was - - -

Q136 Yeah.

A - - - and it was pretty wild. I mean - - -

Q137 Yes.

A - - - basically it was white water everywhere.

Q138 Yeah

A It was, you know, it was over 70 knots reading and it was just white water with waves coming in really two directions. And it had really turned white for quite a time then, probably an hour, probably an hour, maybe 2 hours - - -

Q139 Mmm.

A - - - and it was just cutting where, where the diving

Q140 Yeah

A to sea, like, you couldn't see him or anything. You know, point of the guys with the Sword of Orion and with any, I reckon we could have passed them, we weren't even near them as it turned out, in the, in the positions, but we could have passed within 100 yards and probably not seen the boat, anything. Like, it was really, there was no visible visibility for a couple of hours there.

Q141 Yeah. Now what about wave heights. Are you able to put any - - -

A I've never really been able to put wave heights into perspective - - -

Q142 Mmm.

A - - - I think, you know, you talk about 20 feet or 30 feet, it's very difficult to know, because - - -

Q143 Yeah.

A - - - you know, you can have 60 foot waves in the Atlantic there where they're nice long waves, you're just sailing up and down.

Q144 Mmm.

A It's short, it's the short steepness of them that's a real - - -

Q145 Mmm.

A - - - recording measure. I don't know, you know, I mean I don't know what I put on my, I did a bit of a round robin and Grimes and Fraser Johnson, Col and these fellows, they've had also plenty of experience, you know, they're putting 50, 60 feet and, you know, 20, 30 metres, it's - - -

Q146 Mmm.

A - - - it's a very hard one.

Q147 Yeah.

A It's always very hard to judge what height waves are - - -

Q148 Mmm.

A - - - I think. I don't really know what the answer to it is - - -

Q149 Mmm.

A - - - you're in a bad sea and you, you steer, steer to it, but - - -

Q150 Mmm.

A - - - it's really the severity. You can have, you can have waves in the bay here - - -

Q151 Mmm.

A - - - that are 2 and 3 metres high - - -

Q152 Mmm.

A - - - and when it comes up suddenly they, they get very steep.

Q153 Mmm.

A And Bass Strait is much the same. I mean, not the height of the wave, it's the steepness of them - - -

Q154 Mmm.

A - - - that's the real problem.

Q155 So you were out of the storm within 2 hours and, and cruising fairly well?

A Oh, no, we, no, I wouldn't say that. We, we sort of, it's, we were out, I, I guess 3 or 4 hours.

Q156 All right.

A We probably, probably looking at, probably 2.45. so we started to, no around 45, 50 knots of wind through the 27th, 7.00am, 8.00am. Oh, we withdrew, we withdrew on the, I started to sail back on, 15.45, so we turned, arriving in Eden at 2.45. So we, a lot of that time we were in fairly - - -

Q157 Yeah.

A - - - nasty winds, you know.

Q158 Yeah.

A When we started going back we had 68 knots. So, yeah, we've probably, probably had nasty weather for the best part of, oh, 6 hours - - -

Q159 Yeah.

A - - - before we started really, we moved into more manageable comfortable - - -

Q160 Yeah.

A I, I'd say, I'd say probably for the first 2 hours after we, we did turn we were trying to decide whether we'd run straight out, whether we'd edge up higher doing, and it was, it was really looking bad at that point.

Q161 Mmm.

A After that it was just a long --- -

Q162 Yeah.

A - - - haul slug.

Q163 Yeah.

A But certainly the question was, which to go? We decide to run away, decided we were going to running with the low, the speed it was moving, we'd be in it for longer.

Q164 Mmm.

A We started heading for New Zealand, we also didn't want to really pole.

Q165 Mmm.

A So it was a case of, well here's a comfortable course, let's use it.

Q166 Yeah. Yeah. Now was there any sea sickness on board?

A No, funnily enough, there was none.

Q167 Right. Well that's good then.

A It was quite surprising, I think Skippy, Skippy's prone to, or he takes tablets - - -

Q168 Yeah.

A - - - and I think one other guy took some
tablets, but nobody was sea sick, which was quite
interesting.

Q169 Mmm.

A Usually we don't have sea sickness - - -

Q170 Mmm.

A - - - on board, because most of the crew, pretty
experienced in long distance sailing - - -

Q171 Yeah.

A - - - but sometimes, you know, a few maybe short, short
term

Q172 Mmm.

A Certainly no one was, as you say, disabled with sea
sickness - - -

Q173 Right.

A - - - by any means.

Q174 How was morale on the boat?

A It was good.

Q175 the storm

A Quite yeah.

Q176 Oh, that's good. Now so far as safety gear, harnesses
and lanyards and all that sort of stuff - - -

A Yeah.

Q177 Do you provide that equipment on your boat?

A I provide a full set of it - - -

Q178 Right.

A - - - on board because you need that, safety inspection and - - -

Q179 Yeah.

A - - - you need it if nobody's got it. A number of them wear their own - - -

Q180 Right.

A - - - their own gear.

Q181 Mmm.

A At the moment, I'm fairly light and I've got a pretty heavy safety harness built into my jacket - - -

Q182 All right.

A And I prefer using that to one of the ship's lanyards which are also grossly over built but - - -

Q183 Mmm.

A - - - they're very good. I just don't like muckin' around putting the harness thing on, when you get up top straight away you need to hook on.

Q184 Yeah.

A So my preference is to the coat. There's been talk about people slipping out of a harness because they wear, wear just a harness in the coat, well if they don't tighten it up - - -

Q185 Yeah.

A - - - they could slip out of it.

Q186 Yeah.

A But from a safety point of view, my personal opinion is I'd much rather, if I've got to go up the top quickly, have my coat, I've got my lanyard in my pocket already

hooked to the that'll clip and hook on there. These harnesses, you've got to put your arms in 'em and muck around, and they're upside down and - - -

Q187 Mmm.

A - - - they're awkward, very awkward to put on, I think.

Q188 Yeah.

A And, and I think the main thing is that they put their belts on tight enough.

Q189 Yeah.

A They're fairly unlikely to slip out of it if they've got their belt done up tightly enough.

Q190 Yeah.

A I think you're less likely to slip out of the full harness but, you know, I, I think the belt tighter - - -

Q191 Yeah.

A - - - would be my preference. But, that's - - -

Q192 Yeah.

A - - - everyone's got a different preference to what's safe.

Q193 Mmm.

A Because, you know, lifting Skippy aboard, he had his harness on but we had him in the life sling and he was in the water and the crew were grabbing hold of his, his jacket to lift him up because his arms were up like that - - -

Q194 Mmm.

A - - - the jacket was sliding up - - -

Q195 Yeah.

A - - - and he had great concern - - -

A - - - of sliding out of the jacket.

Q196 Mmm.

A It wasn't til we started to lift him on the life sling,
I sort of said, Quick, grab hold of an arm the
lanyards, he'll get that on the halyards and, so we've
got him now, and swung him overboard, but we may have
been better if, or would have been better to take the,
the lanyard and lift him on that - - -

Q197 Mmm.

A - - - with the, you know, may, maybe both the life
sling and that.

Q198 Mmm.

A But you don't always see these things as quickly as you
need to under the circumstances.

Q199 That's right. Now what brand, are they all the same
brand, the harnesses - - -

A Yeah - - -

Q199 - - - you've got on the boat?

A - - - they're all the same brand, they're all branded -
- -

Q200 What brand?

A - - - in fact I don't think they're, I think they're
Bourke, he had, he was the only one a couple of years
ago to have that qualified safety harness.

Q201 All right.

A Yeah, there's, there's a limit to the number of people who had approval, you know, like - - -

Q202 Yeah.

A Australian Standard approval - - -

Q203 Right.

A - - - for a safety harness. They've got to be branded - - -

Q204 Yeah.

A - - - both the lanyards and the harness, so to pass, really. Well the harness is mine in my jacket is not a branded one, but it's a style of one that they use around the world as - - -

Q205 Mmm.

A - - - it's a real heavy webbing, one which I'm pretty comfortable in.

Q206 Mmm.

A I think probably on reflection, a guy like Skippy ought to have a much heavier one than the average guy.

Q207 Yeah, yeah.

A You know, I think your harnesses, on the Australian Standard, I think if he was flung out and still on the harness, he might be heavy enough to break one.

Q208 Yeah.

A It certainly wouldn't break the, the lanyards, but it could break a harness. (Tape Beeping)

Q209 Yeah. (Tape Beeping)

A So - - -

Q210 Yeah. (Tape Beeping)

A - - - I think that it's - (Tape Beeping) - you know, lessons - (Tape Beeping) - to be learned in those - (Tape Beeping) - things.

Q211 Yeah. Well so far as life rafts, you had a life raft on board, obviously?

A We had two life rafts on board.

Q212 Right.

A Yeah.

Q213 Where were they stowed?

A They're stowed right, just underneath, next to the companion way - - -

Q214 Right.

A - - - of the cabin. Just besides there. Sort of one lift - - -

Q215 Mmm.

A - - - straight up.

Q216 Now with all the wealth of experience on your boat, has anybody that you know of on your boat ever deployed a life raft?

A Well I have a number of times in a - - -

Q217 All right.

A - - - prac, not in the water.

Q218 Right.

A So, and a few of them has seen the practice ones. The answer is, probably none of 'em have deployed one in the water. I've, mine are just coming up for service again inviting the crew up to get them deflated - - -

Q219 Mmm.

A - - - at R.F.D - - -

Q220 Mmm.

A - - - so they know what they look like again.

Q221 Yeah.

A This is probably one of the things, I've got the latest ones where you only have to re-service them every 3 years or 4 years, 4 years, and they're coming up for service in May.

Q222 Mmm.

A Previously they come up for service every year. You'd take a few of the guys up and pull the lanyard on 'em,

Q223 All right.

A - - - and get, see them get deployed, but it's a pretty important point. There's not many let off flares, there's not many pulled life rafts.

Q224 Yeah.

A And there's not many do, man overboard drill.

Q225 Yeah.

A And I guess in 40-odd years of sailing this is the first man overboard experience I've had.

Q226 Yeah.

A Although we all knew what to do - - -

Q227 Yeah.

A - - - we're pretty dedicated to doing some practice - - -

Q228 Yeah.

A - - - at it.

Q229 Yeah. The time by my watch is 11.05, I'm just going to suspend the interview for a tape change.

INTERVIEW SUSPENDED

INTERVIEW RESUMED

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q230 Interview between Detective Gray and Mr Abrahams recommenced. The time is now 11.08. Yes, we were just discussing life rafts, and I think you mentioned that you're going to do some drills and have your life rafts rechecked and that sort of thing. Do you, or, or were you aware of a life raft flare demonstration which was held at the Cruising Yacht Club in Sydney prior to the race?

A Yes. I understand so - - -

Q231 Did any - - -

A - - - yeah.

Q231 - - - of your crew attend that, do you know?

A No. No, we wouldn't have been up for that, in time for that one. No, we, but there's been some good life raft and flare demonstrations and tests in Melbourne - - -

Q232 Yeah.

A - - - over the years which we've taken part in.

Q233 O.K.

A But - - -

Q234 Yeah, O.K. Lou, you mentioned earlier, just to clarify a couple of points. The baby stay - - -

A Yeah.

Q235 Could you just explain, explain what that is?

A O.K. A baby stay is forehead, forehead of, on the forehead part of the mast about three quarters of the way up, height, above the topping lift. We use it to stabilise the mast so that you get a, it, it's, it's it's anchor point on the mast, it's really about opposite or just above the the check stays and when you tighten up the check stays against the baby stay it really keeps the mast rigid. And importantly, not that many people use them. I've used them for years on ocean racing because it, if you jump off a wave your mast can flick through, either invert or otherwise and I've made a practice of anchoring it well, well and secure through, past a deck point to a anchor point and it seems to me that, my boat when I bought it, certainly the anchor point wasn't, there's a straight line from the mast through to the keel that was just anchored on a D ring on the deck. And probably in light weather would be fine, except you don't really need it in light weather. So I anchored mine further forward so that you, if you double the distance away from the mast you don't have the load on it and just continue that line straight through, through underneath the deck to the keel and a very strong anchor point there. I think this is a safety measure which would certainly stop the deck being pulled off in the case of a boat rolling it's mast in the water. And if you're going to roll the mast in the water, there's huge strains on the rigging and one part

of the rigging would be the baby stay which one might not take into consideration. So I feel that's a, something that should be watched on yachts. Maybe a lot of them automatically have it in their design, maybe a lot of them have it, perhaps a little too steep where the loading becomes, the straighter your rigging is to the mast, the greater the loading on that piece of rigging, and you're better off to have it as far forward as reasonably operative. So that's, I felt was a safety feature which certainly keeps the mast on the boat. You feel a lot more confident the mast is going to stay on the boat if you've got your, you know, even when we were just down to a storm headsail, like having the rig locked in tight with the check stays on tight and the baby stay on tight, the mast is very very rigid.

Q236 Mmm.

A And whether other people use them or not, I don't know.

Q237 Mmm.

A But I guess, to my knowledge, a lot of them don't.

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

Q238 But you feel that it'll certainly strengthen the mast and, and increase the safety and - - -

A I, I feel - - -

Q238 of the vessel?

A I feel it's a safety factor that - - -

Q239 Mmm.

A - - - for ocean racing that should be adopted.

Q240

Do you believe the scantlings of most modern, or shall I say, later boats that are built aren't strong enough?

A

Well they appear to have all stood up. I, as far as I can understand it, the yachts other than the ones that got rolled badly and pulled the mast and part of their deck, the other yachts stood up pretty well. So you look at, there was boats like Kingura and Winston Churchill are built like battle ships, and they had problems. You look at light boats which got, took a fair beating and didn't have problems, I think this year was probably pretty dramatic in the fact there were very few masts broke. A year, a year like this couple of years ago, what'd have had masts down everywhere, rudders broken, and it would have been a sad sight, I think. But remarkably these yachts stood up pretty well. I guess you've got to look at what happened when these yachts got rolled in, did they have things that were attached to a point in the deck that could be ripped out, such as a deck being ripped or torn when the boat, I mean, there's huge strains on a mast when the boat's gonna do a roll, 360 roll, or even a part roll. The strain on the rigging is enormous. Now something's got to break, the mast has got to break, but maybe if the rigging is pretty good, and maybe the loading comes on pretty late, and it comes on to things that may be attached to the fore deck where you haven't got strengthening points, or maybe further aft, if there aren't enough strengthening points which

causes the deck to depart from the, from the hull around the gunwale, or rip open. And once it rips it loses its integrity - - -

Q241

A - - - and without inspecting these boats, I haven't seen them and I can only read what I've read, that they lost their deck integrity which, after losing their mast, which is likely to happen. I mean without the mast round in the hull there it can do a lot of damage, but one of the things that could be helpful against that is strong deck points that go through the hull to make sure that you don't damage the integrity of the deck when the mast does go over the side.

Q242 Mmm. O.K.

A But that's not coming from a boat builder, that's coming from - - -

Q243 No, no - - -

A

Q243 - - - just that, yeah, yeah, that's, I understand that. When you went through the eye of the storm did you have any barometer readings that you made in your log?

A Yeah. Yeah, we got down to, we were almost down to the lowest point on the, on the fax, we were down to 9.90. It was just dropping at a dramatic rate, like, from, sort of 0-3-2-0 was 9.94, from 9.95 just prior to that, 9.94 at 7.50, 9.94 at 9.50, 9, I can't read my writing, something, 9.94, 9.93 at 13.00, 9.90 at 15.00, so if we just say that's - - -

Q244 And that's, the 15.00 on, on which day?
A 15.45 on the 27th.
Q245 O.K. So it went down to 9.90?
A 9.90. It went down under that though. I failed to record it, as I said the 9, 9.89 and, no, came back up to 1002 again, 1003. But really it sort of, I think it was 9.98 in the eye of the, the eye of the low in, on 9.88 rather.
Q246 Right.
A at, off Flinders Island there.
Q247 9.98 was the lowest - - -
A 9 - - -
Q248 But you didn't record that?
A - - - 98 - - -
Q249 Yes.
A - - - we, we went down, we were only 1 millibar above the low pressure at - - -
Q250 O.K.
A - - - and said, you know, we're virtually almost past it - - -
Q251 Mmm.
A - - - is it safer back or forward?
Q252 Yeah. So it's 9.88?
A 9, 9.88 was the lowest - - -
Q253 Yeah, the lowest, yeah.
A - - - off - - -
Q254 Mmm.
A - - - on the weather fax and we went to 9.89.

Q255 O.K. All right.

A It becomes pretty hard to write properly when you're
.....

Q256 Yeah.

A - - - can see, I can't understand my own writing.

Q257 And you mentioned the Brooks & Gatehouse?

A Yeah.

Q258 And that's just a brand name for your - - -

A brand - - -

Q259 G.P.S?

A Yeah.

Q260 O.K.

A The Brooks & Gatehouse is the instruments - - -

Q261 Yes.

A - - - and the G.P, I've got two G.P.S's, I've got three
actually, but I've got one G.P.S. is on the Brook
& Gatehouse system. I've got a second aerial on a data
link, a charter link, rather. That gives me the chart
position - - -

Q262 Mmm.

A - - - not, so they're two independent systems.

Q263 All right.

A The third one is just a, keep it in the cupboard there
as a hand held one if all else fails.

Q264 Right. And do you, do you plot on the chart? Or do
you use just the, the electronic - - -

A No.

Q264 - - - chart plotter?

A No, I use, I plot the chart.

Q265 All right. O.K.

A I've, I position on the chart

Q266 Yes.

A I take lat and longitude readings continually and just position on the chart.

Q267 Mmm.

A Yeah, I'm still old fashioned in that way.

Q268 Yeah. Nothing wrong with that. And just the, your jacket and most of the other harnesses that, and, and lanyards, do you think the inclusion of a crutch strap should - - -

A Well that's - - -

Q268 - - - should aid?

A It'd certainly help to get someone out, out of the water easier, I think. I think they'd be a bloody pain in the arse to be frank - - -

Q269 Mmm.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q270 Mmm.

A - - - try to wear them

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

Q271 Mmm.

A - - - and you'd be in you'd be inclined not to wear them.

Q272 Mmm.

A Maybe say an extra one that you could sort of tuck in so that if you are overboard you could - - -

Q273 Put it on.

A - - - put it on. Might be a way to go, but just wearing it around your crutch there - - -

Q274 Yeah.

A - - - they'd really be very awkward.

Q275 Mmm.

A I think they'd be hooking and things, it would be very difficult. But if you had one that was part, aside from your harness, maybe it's wearable. I've thought long and hard about the things, I've got an inflatable vest that I wear underneath my wet weather gear. It's brought me to the case that I haven't got around to it yet, but, of inflating it one day with the harness done up and see if I could still breath.

Q276

A It'd be an interesting exercise.

Q277 I think you'd better have someone with you when you try it, perhaps.

A A quick knife slash it open.

Q278 O.K. And one final point is the jack stays.

A Yeah.

Q279 The attachments to the, to the vessel - - -

A

Q280 Just explain briefly what a jack stay is and it's, and it's use?

A Well a jack stay is, now the regulation is for using webbing which I think it 3,000 kilo, I'm just, better not state, mine passes the regulation of, it's a piece,

piece of webbing, it's about, about 40 millimetre wide by 3 or 4 millimetre thick. It passes the test. It's tacked to a strong point on the deck, forward, and runs straight along the deck both sides in a V shape, to a strong point in the aft part of the cockpit. It's, utilises one of the points to put your harness on and it's not the, it's a point if you're moving around, take it on and you can move around pretty freely it slides with you. That's what's referred to as, jack stays.

Q281 Mmm.

A They're, they used to have, be able to use wire ones which, I've got to say I preferred, but these are new ones which are nice and easy, you can sit on them type of thing, probably better than wire. But a, they're an easy place to, as you come out of the cockpit you've got to lean over the side and just hook you, or have someone hook you - - -

Q282 Mmm.

A - - - safety harness on as an exit point. They allow you a bit more freedom of movement.

Q283 O.K. And do they have to comply with a standard?

A Yes. Yes the standard is written in the A.Y.F. book.

Q284 O.K. So there's a set standard just for jack stays?

A Yeah. Mmm.

Q285 And do they run through a common eye at the bow of the vessell, so in fact it's - - -

A Yeah.

Q285 - - - a, it's one piece of webbing that runs from - -
-

A No, they're, they're shackled both sides of a common
eye but they don't run through it.

Q286 O.K. But is it the case where they can run through, or
do they, is it, is it - - -

A I suppose - - -

Q286 - - - that they have to be shackled at either end - -
-

A I think, I think - - -

Q286 - - - of the - - -

A - - - it, don't have to read the regulation
again, but I'd say that they, made and so on with
shackle - - -

Q287 Mmm.

A - - - an eye at each so that they're fitted, so that
you can tighten them.

Q288 O.K.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q289 Now there's just, sorry Dave have you - - -

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

No, I've finished now, thank you.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q290 There's just one thing in relation to the Winston
Churchill, Lou, that you mentioned you sailed on her -
- -

A Mmm. Lot of years ago.

Q291 How long ago?

A Oh, about 38 years ago.

Q292 O.K.

A 36 years ago.

Q293 What was her rigging set up in those days?

A Oh, when we were sailing her then she was a big, she was ketch, ketch rig.

Q294 Right.

A And had a big power spread on her and pumpkin on her -
- -

Q295 Mmm.

A - - - and carried a lot of sail.

Q296 Have you got any comment or, on her going down at all, last year?

A Well it's an old yacht. It's very well built. I understand they'd restored her, whether they did much re-fastening on it, I really don't know, but from what I read about it, that she launched out of a wave and fell on her side, and, and sprung the sides, which was understandable. She's a lot of tons of boat to, to drop on her side, but you'd reckon that boat could go anywhere. Some years ago she had to be beached off Wonthaggi, it must have been about 60, 1960, I was out in my own boat, Lowanda, at the time off Wilsons Promontory, they were off, off Cape Liptrap they'd just left anchorage at, off Warcool, and Sir Arthur Warner owed it at the time and he had to get back to a cabinet meeting and, Minister for Transport. Fortunately in those days, because when they, they jumped off a wave

and the mast unstepped itself and sat on the carpet plank and started leaking. They couldn't control the water so they beached it off Wonthaggi just in time for a road needed to be built there, so they were, it was fated, one of those - - -

Q297 What are you trying to say?

A One of those coincidences that, in life.

SENIOR CONSTABLE UPSTON

Q298 O.K.

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q299 O.K. There's nothing further to say, look, have you got any recommendations or views or anything that you'd like to speak to us about for future, or - - -

Q300 I think one of the things I'm looking at, we launched a Dan Buoy when Skippy went out, that's a flag, and the regulations call for that flag to have on it a life ring, a flare and a, a life ring, a light and a and dye marker. And it was, mine was the type that you pull and air, air inflated and it comes up. With the wind and the sea conditions, one of the, the V.B. lines with the in it flew underneath there. It just became a shit of a mess and they finished up, had to cut it adrift, because it was gonna finish up in the propeller, the boat, affect the rescue. I would have avoided the Dan Buoy type which, I've got it somewhere, no. Did have it somewhere. It, John Buoy or Dan, Dan Buoy type. I'll find it for you in a moment - - -

Q301 Yeah.

A - - - but it's a, a unit that's got a, basically you sit in, you sit in a life ring instead. it, that acts like a life sling - - -

Q302 Yeah.

A - - - but is a second life sling system.

Q303 All right.

A And it takes the place of the life buoy. I brought too many papers down here with me. Here we are.

Q304 Oh, yeah.

A But that's just that system there.

Q305 Yeah.

A It floats, inflates, 'cause I'm not sure all rescues are done in such calm water as this.

Q306 Mmm.

A But that's in place of your flag. Well your flags on top of this and it all launches with your accident life ring so you don't anything caught up, it follows out, and I think I'd use that instead of the other type. That's the type I've got at the moment. This bit of string here finished up under the rail when it went overboard - - -

Q307 Mmm.

A - - - but that's the unit we deployed, all looks easy, but in the pitch black dark, wild sea - - -

Q308 Mmm.

A - - - it hang up and it's, it's stuffed up. So you can't get rid of it, and the worst part about it is, you can't, you've got to cut it adrift because it's

gunna go, finish up in your prop. So one of the things that delayed our rescue, maybe a minute, was, we weren't gunna put it in gear until we got rid of that V.B. cord - - -

Q309 Mmm.

A - - - out of the way.

Q310 Mmm.

A So I'm changing from that unit to one of those - - -

Q311 Mmm.

A - - - which I recommend as probably the safer way. I can't see Skippy laying in this just the same, but - - -
-

Q312 Anything else you've got any view on?

A No, I think that's probably about it. I mean, we're going through all our safety - - -

Q313 Mmm.

A - - - ideas again. It's - - -

Q314 Mmm.

A - - - the first time you look at these things in new experience and say - - -

Q315 Mmm.

A - - - what could be better?

Q316 Mmm. O.K. The time by my watch is now 11.28. This interview is concluded.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED