

DETECTIVE SENIOR CONSTABLE GRAY

Q1 This is an electronically recorded interview between Detective Senior Constable Stuart Gray and David Wiggin, at the Sydney Cruising Yacht Club on Friday, the 29th of January, 1999. Also present, seated to my left, is Senior Constable Dave Upston from the New South Wales Water Police. The time now is 12.15, sorry, 1.15pm. As I've already explained to you, David, Senior Constable Upston and myself are making inquiries in relation to the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, and we've been tasked to speak to crews and other persons involved in the race, either directly or indirectly - - -

A M'mm.

Q1 - - - as part of the investigation. So, to start with, I'll just get you to read on to the record your full name?

A Yeah.

Q2 Could you read that?

A Yeah. David Wiggin.

Q3 Your date of birth?

A 1st of May, 1960.

Q4 And your current address?

A 81 Chaleyer Street, Rose Bay.

Q5 O.K. And your occupation?

A Company director.

Q6 O.K. Can you give me some background in regards to your sailing experience?

A Yeah. It was my first Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race

- - -

Q7 Yeah.

A - - - but I've done, over the last three years, I've done a number of other ocean races like Brisbane to Gladstone, Lord Howe, Gosford to Lord Howe, as a lead-up to doing my first Hobart.

Q8 O.K. Now, so far the race of last year, which boat were you involved with?

A This year or last year?

Q9 Last year?

A It was last year, wasn't it?

Q10 It was last year.

A Margaret Rintoul - - -

Q11 Right.

A - - - II.

Q12 And what position, or, what was your duties on board that vessel?

A Mast, basically, which is just basically halyards and sail changes and that sort of thing.

Q13 O.K. Now, if I could take you to the afternoon of the 27th of December.

A M'mm.

Q14 You may or may not recall that date - - -

A Yeah.

Q14 - - - as such. I can tell you it was round the 27th, the afternoon of the 27th, in relation to one to five flares which were set off by the Sword of Orion.

A M'mm.

Q15 I believe that you were on, sitting on the deck - - -

A Yeah.

Q15 - - - at the time? Would you be able to explain to me what you know, or what you saw or what you heard so far as that's concerned?

A Yeah, sure. Sitting in the cockpit and from memory I think Bill Reilly was steering. And, or was he steering? Anyway, there was three of us in the cockpit. There was Bill, the skipper, Richard Purcell and myself.

Q16 Yeah.

A And Richard said, he thought he'd spotted a flare down to leeward, and he pointed in the general direction and both Bill and I looked down there but we basically couldn't see anything, like, all we could see was just breaking water and, and I would have looked for, maybe, 20 or 30 seconds just scanning the direction that Richard had pointed, and couldn't see anything, basically. So I never actually saw the flare or certainly not the boat that the flare came from.

Q17 Are you aware of the colour of the flare that was - - -

A I don't know whether he said it was a red flare or not. I can't remember, to be honest. I never saw it, so. I assume it was a red flare. If it was a, if it was a distress flare.

Q18 Yeah. Are you aware of any communications that were

commenced between Richard and the navigator after that?

A Yes. I think, well, Richard's words were, I think he said to Col Best, the navigator, he said, "I've seen a flare down to leeward, I don't know which boat it is", but he said, essentially words, "Nothing we can do", because we didn't have a motor at that stage, and conditions were fairly marginal for ourselves as well. We were taking a lot of, every third wave was breaking into the cockpit and, and he said, "Basically, it's my call. I don't want to put our boat at risk", and you know, "There's nothing we can do for them".

Q19 Yeah.

A And that's, I can't remember if that's, those were his exact words, but that was the general gist of the conversation that they had.

Q20 Are you aware of, if he requested his navigator to send something through to Telstra Control so far as that flare?

A I'm not, actually, to be honest with you. I can't remember.

Q21 That's all right. Now, are you able to give me a description of the seas, so far as you saw them?

A They were pretty big. I couldn't begin to give you a height. I mean, it was just half the height of the mast, taller maybe, like it's just, you know. But we, every third wave was breaking, essentially the top was in the cockpit, or breaking across the boat, and at one stage we had a sail wash, there was a sail lashed down

the side of the boat, so we didn't want to take the wash boards out to put it down below, 'cause we had so much but it got washed off into, across the boat. We had to drag it back and all we could think of doing was stuffing it into the cockpit, which in actual fact was quite effective, because every time a wave broke into the cockpit from thereon in, it just emptied straight out, because we'd take up, it was a number 2 headsail from memory, so it took up quite a bit of volume of the cockpit. So, you know, there's a lot of water in the boat and, like, as I say, the, the engine had flooded or stopped working. And at one stage the, we had, we just had a storm jibber on the afternoon of the 27th, and the halyard snapped and we had, we had to go forward and reconnect it.

Q22 M'mm.

A And that's, you know, it wasn't, like, conditions were fairly, as bad as, well, obviously, it's my first Hobart race.

Q23 Yeah.

A But certainly as bad as I've ever seen. I mean, a lot more experienced people on the boat than me, said they'd never seen, you know. So, you know, I'm sure people have told you it was fairly, fairly bad.

Q24 And the winds were similar?

A Yeah. Well, we had over 60 knots on the, on the gauge in the cockpit, but, so, it was pretty breezy.

Q25 Are you aware of who discovered that the motor wasn't

working?

A I couldn't say with any certainty, to be honest. It would have been when we tried to charge the batteries, I suppose. But, as to when that was, because obviously we were on and off watch and that sort of thing.

Q26 Yeah.

A But it may have happened while I was off watch, when they discovered the motor. But, but I think we, it was the morning of the 27th, I think, that's a fairly hazy memory. It was in the morning I remember we couldn't start the engine - - -

Q27 All right.

A - - - to charge after the night before, and I'm pretty sure that was on the morning of the 27th.

Q28 Right, O.K.

A But as to the exact, exact time or who turned the engine on I couldn't, couldn't be sure. But it was normally Richard that, that, 'cause he knows the starting sequence of the, for the batteries and switches, so I can only imagine it would be Richard, but I wouldn't, wouldn't know with any certainty.

Q29 That's fine. Your position on the boat was basically changing sails and looking after a lot of the gear?

A M'mm.

Q30 And in fact, an instance arose where you mentioned that the halyard broke on the storm jib - - -

A M'mm.

Q30 - - - or the storm sail?

A Yeah.

Q31 And you had to go up and repair that.

A Yeah. I went, in fact I think at that stage I was the only, apart from the helmsman, I was the only person on deck, and so I, I had, because it was flogging obviously when the halyard had gone, so I was concerned it was going to blow out, so I just went and basically grabbed it and wrestled it down to the deck. And there wasn't much I could do on my own then, because I didn't want to let it go.

Q32 M'mm

A And then it, then two blokes came out of the hatch and we, we sorted it out.

Q33 O.K.

A And got it back up again.

Q34 And, and that procedure was by replacing the halyard -
- -

A Yeah.

Q34 - - - with a, with a, obviously one that wasn't being used.

A A spare, yeah.

Q35 And, and, and the sail was rehoisted and you were able to continue on.

A Yeah.

Q36 Right. In your opinion, do you think that a sail change could have been conducted in those conditions, if, if it was necessary?

A Um - - -

Q37 Being, being a forward hand and being able to, and being in the position to change sails regularly?

A I would say, pretty marginal, actually, because the, the storm jib's on hanks and it's, it's on the, in a so it's actually close to the mast. You don't need to get to the end of the boat to change the sail.

Q38 M'mm.

A If that had blown out, the next sail we had was, I think, a number 5, which, which would have meant we'd had to go to the, right to the bow of the boat and try and get into the because it doesn't have hanks on it, it goes at the and I'm not sure whether we could have done that or not. I mean, I wouldn't like to have tried, put it like that.

Q39 Mm.

A But as to whether we could have done it, that's anybody's guess, I don't know. You wouldn't know until you tried, I suppose.

Q40 But do you believe that, that maybe you could have been placed in jeopardy - - -

A For certain, yeah.

Q40 - - - if that, that manoeuvre was, was required?

A Certainly. Like, you wouldn't do it, you wouldn't do it unless you, if the storm jib had blown out, that's why I was worried about the storm jib, then I guess we would have had to have done something, 'cause under bad poles we would have, we possibly would have been rolled

or, but certainly you wouldn't want people at the sharp end of the boat in those conditions, under any circumstances, really. I mean, it would have been, because, just the weight of the water just over the boat, you would have had people over the side. I guess we would have been high in a storm, but you know, it would have been pretty marginal.

Q41 All right.

A That's not to say that it wouldn't have been possible, but you know, I suppose you don't know until you, until you have to try, but certainly not something we, we would have wanted to do.

Q42 And when you went forward to repair the storm sail

- - -

A Mm.

Q42 - - - you were harnessed on to the boat then?

A Yeah.

Q43 And you remained harnessed on for the full time until the sail, until the shift changed - - -

A Yeah.

Q43 - - - or the watch changed?

A M'mm.

Q44 O.K. Anything further you want to ask, sir?

A Not really, no.

Q45 O.K, that's fine. The time is now 1.25pm. This interview is now concluded.

INTERVIEW CONCLUDED