

1
2 Q. So you broadcast in plain language. Was that on the distress
3 frequency?
4 A. No, on the ship-shore frequency, and I can't recall what it was.
5
6 Q. As I understand it, the reason you broke wireless silence is because not
7 only were you in a very hot situation, but the enemy already knew where you
8 were; that's the case?
9 A. That's right, and we all relied on authority, the captain's authority, he
10 gave the authority.
11
12 THE PRESIDENT
13
14 Q. But when you sent that emergency message, as you say in plain
15 language, it was still sent in Morse?
16 A. Yes, yes.
17
18 Q. Not by voice?
19 A. No, no.
20
21 LEUT VESPER: Thank you, Mr President. They are all the questions I have.
22
23 THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I don't have any more questions. Thank you very
24 much indeed, Mr Brown, you've been very helpful to the Inquiry?
25
26 THE WITNESS: Thank you, Commissioner.
27
28 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW
29
30 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
31
32 THE PRESIDENT: I've come to the house of Mr Frederick House [REDACTED]
33 in Tasmania to take his evidence in this Inquiry.
34
35 Mr House is 90, almost 91 years of age.
36
37 <FREDERICK HENRY HOUSE, sworn
38
39 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER
40
41 LEUT VESPER
42
43 Q. Sir, can you tell us your full name?
44 A. Frederick Henry House.
45
46 Q. You live at [REDACTED] in Tasmania?
47 A. Yes.

1
2 Q. Earlier this afternoon you swore a statutory declaration. Is that so?
3 A. I did.
4
5 LEUT VESPER: I tender that statutory declaration, sir.
6
7 THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 13.
8
9 EXHIBIT #13 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF FREDERICK HENRY HOUSE
10 DECLARED 26/06/08
11
12 LEUT VESPER
13
14 Q. Mr House, with the President's leave I'm just going to ask you a few
15 more questions, if you could?
16 A. Yeah, that's right.
17
18 Q. You served in HMAS Sydney for almost five years. Is that so?
19 A. Yeah.
20
21 Q. You left her in May 1940?
22 A. 40, yeah.
23
24 Q. For most of your time in Sydney you were at action stations in X turret.
25 Is that so?
26 A. The first 21 months we were - when we commissioned her was in the
27 Med and my action stations and cruising station was in the HA director. There's
28 a phone operator.
29
30 Q. Then you changed to X turret?
31 A. I came - when we come home I went through a gunnery course in
32 Cerberus. It started off as a seaman gunner, but they changed the format of
33 learning to specialised stuff, so there was three of us; two New Zealanders and
34 myself went gunlayers, some went general quarters, some went torpedoes and
35 so forth. They specialised just in those things. That's why I didn't have any
36 knowledge except my observation of what went on in the guns because all we
37 done was gunlaying and that was gun laying and gun training.
38
39 Q. Did you know how the cordite rooms and the shell rooms all worked
40 together or was that something --
41 A. Only by my observation in the turret. When I rejoined the ship I was
42 standing up behind the gunlayer, he was senior to me, so he was actually the
43 gunlayer and I knew what to do but I'd keep an eye on him and occasionally I'd
44 look around the turret and see the way things were worked.
45
46 Q. What I'm interested to know, Mr House, when you were closed up in
47 X turret do you recall whether the turret men, yourself and the people in the

1 compartments below you, did you ever practise the drill for going into local
2 control? Was that something that you ever practised or exercised?
3 A. Yes, up to a point, yes. We trained around - supposedly target and all
4 the rest of it, yes.
5
6 Q. Did you ever practice working with a loss of power?
7 A. No, not to my knowledge.
8
9 Q. Do you know whether the men in the compartments below in the cordite
10 rooms or in the shell rooms did they ever practise what to do in the event of
11 there being no power, do you know if they a practised that?
12 A. Never heard of it, no.
13
14 Q. Did you ever practice using, or the men below you, did they ever practise
15 using the hoist?
16 A. Yes, they set up the practice projectiles, that was, like, before the war.
17 Plenty of practise of loading and all that with practice projectiles when we go on
18 a shoot.
19
20 Q. Do you know, did they practise using the hoists manually?
21 A. No, no, I wouldn't know because I was never down there, you see.
22
23 Q. When you were earlier working in the high altitude director, that was
24 before the war. Is that the case?
25 A. Yes, yeah.
26
27 Q. Do you know were the 4 inch guns ever exercised against other ships or
28 surface targets?
29 A. Yes, yes, we used to often have practise in the Med. They would have a
30 plane coming over towing a drogue and we were second in line and we'd have
31 a practice shoot, the ship in front would fire first and we were too good for the
32 others, we used to shoot down the drogue and in the finish they put us last in
33 line because every time we had a practise shoot we knocked the drogue down
34 and they reckon we were too good, the Poms.
35
36 THE PRESIDENT
37
38 Q. The 4 inch guns were mainly used against aircraft, were they?
39 A. Yes.
40
41 Q. That was their function?
42 A. Yes. Of a night we would have a star shell which you fire over the top of
43 the enemy, that's if he was close enough. Of course when they lit up it lit up the
44 target, you see.
45
46 LEUT VESPER
47

1 Q. Did you ever practise the 4 inch guns against surface targets, like a
2 floating target, the 4 inch guns?
3 A. No, because I wasn't on the 4 inch guns. Any time we closed up I was in
4 the turret after that.

5
6 Q. But when you were working in the high altitude director?
7 A. Yes.

8
9 Q. The HA director, you were guiding the 4 inch guns can you remember
10 ever practising firing against surface targets?
11 A. I can't recall there's a surface - surface target. No, I can't remember that.
12 I don't think we did. It was all aircraft.

13
14 Q. Mr President, I might just move on, if I could to another topic, that is
15 Mr House, I want to ask you some questions about the two occasions you can
16 remember when Sydney had an encounter with an unidentified ship. In your
17 statement, or your statutory declaration, you talk about the time Sydney came
18 across the Aquitania?
19 A. Yes.

20
21 Q. Orontes?
22 A. Orontes, was it. Orontes.

23
24 Q. On the first occasion when Sydney came across the Aquitania, did
25 Sydney come to action stations straight away, or was there a pause between --
26 A. No, when we got - when the ship was sighted we would be either called
27 up to cruising stations or action stations, usually action stations.

28
29 Q. In your statutory declaration in paragraph 12 when you talk about the
30 Aquitania encounter you say you remember over the public address system the
31 call for the ship to go to action stations. Is that something you remember as
32 you sit here now?
33 A. Yes, we went into action stations fairly often. Of course they were the
34 only two ships I could remember. There were other ships sighted. We always
35 closed up to action stations.

36
37 THE PRESIDENT

38
39 Q. On sighting a ship?
40 A. I beg your pardon?

41
42 Q. On sighting a ship?
43 A. Yes.

44
45 Q. Until it was identified?
46 A. Well, when we closed up we didn't know what ships they were because
47 after we fell out there was - of course, there was about 150 - 160-odd members

1 on deck, the 4 inch gun deck, the torpedoes, the fire parties, .5 crews and all
2 that. There would be talk after and they'd say, oh, that was such and such a
3 ship, like, you know. And we'd get all stories from that because we didn't know
4 what was going on when we was in the turret. We didn't know what was going
5 on outside. Occasionally, as we ran from - after the action stations was
6 sounded we might see them on the horizon, see it in the distance, but just as a
7 quick glimpse, you see.

8

9 LEUT VESPER

10

11 Q. Can you remember whether on the occasion that you saw the ship that
12 turned out to be the Aquitania did Sydney change course when it came to
13 action stations or after it came to action stations, do you know?

14 A. We picked up the Aquitania, because we didn't know it was the Aquitania
15 then, she was, what, about south of Fremantle towards Cape of Good Hope
16 and we altered course to be parallel with her and, of course after that I don't
17 know, you see, because we were closed up action stations.

18

19 THE PRESIDENT

20

21 Q. When you went to action stations on that occasion she was on the
22 horizon, was she?

23 A. Yes.

24

25 Q. You then went to action stations and you couldn't see what was
26 happening after that?

27 A. No, no. You see, we didn't even know it was the Aquitania until after we
28 fell out and went back to normal duties, you see, when the crew would be
29 talking about it in the mess deck and so forth.

30

31 LEUT VESPER

32

33 Q. I might move on, Mr House, to what all the crewmen were wearing when
34 they were working in the various parts of the ship.

35

36 THE PRESIDENT: Just go to 14 and 15, I think.

37

38 Q. The second occasion when you can remember going to action stations in
39 respect of an unidentified vessel, I think the vessel turned out to be the
40 Orontes. Is that right?

41 A. Yes, coming back from the Middle East.

42

43 Q. How far away was the ship when you went to action stations, do you
44 remember?

45 A. Well, it was night time - you couldn't judge, really. All the lookout - what
46 we heard after, all the lookout - well, I did see - I thought I saw the wake of the
47 ship when we were closing up, you see. The lookouts, they first saw her and

1 reported it, of course we closed up. When we come back to the mess decks
2 and everything that's how we found out it was the Aquitania - the Orontes.

3

4 Q. Again, you got a call to go to action stations?

5 A. Yes, yes, at that time I know we all had everything lined up on her,
6 because we sent them the challenge signal and there was 10 seconds, she was
7 lucky, 10 seconds you're allowed and it was about 12 seconds before she
8 answered the secret signal. If she hadn't answered then we'd have probably
9 given her full bore, you see.

10

11 LEUT VESPER

12

13 Q. Mr House, I've just got one question about clothing and that is when you
14 joined the 4 inch gun crew, and I know it was only for a short time, or at any
15 other time when you were serving in the ship, can you remember whether any
16 of the upper deckmen would wear leather aprons?

17 A. No, I can't remember that at all. I don't think they did. I can't recall it.
18 Some - it might have in their particular job but I can't recall ever seeing them.

19

20 LEUT VESPER: Thank you. They are all the questions I have, Mr President.

21

22 THE PRESIDENT

23

24 Q. Did you ever practise a routine for abandoning ship?

25 A. Yes, in the Med.

26

27 Q. Yes?

28 A. Yes, a number of times. As a matter of fact I've got a photo out there,
29 having a swim in the Med.

30

31 Q. What was the routine when you had to practise abandoning ship?

32 A. What happened was we were stationed in Alexandria, Egypt, and when
33 we went out that was during the Italo-Abyssinian War. When we went out we
34 had a mock battle and we were supposed to have been sunk by two
35 submarines. And then we were given the order to abandon ship. We did. We
36 abandoned ship, we went swimming. Up until that we went swimming was
37 pretty serious. We went into it pretty hard, and of course when we went
38 swimming we turned it into a joke.

39

40 Q. When the signal was given or the alarm was given did you have to
41 muster at a particular place?

42 A. No, it was just get over. Lower the boats, so - well, in this case we didn't
43 lower the boats we threw the scrambling nets over the side, see, then we all
44 just jumped in the Med, then when we come aboard we climbed up the
45 scrambling nets.

46

47 Q. The boats weren't lowered on that occasion?

1 A. No, not on that occasion, no.
2
3 Q. Is that the only occasion that you can remember when you practised
4 abandon ship?
5
6
7 A. That was the only time we ever abandoned ship. That's why I can't
8 understand why no-one was - survived the Sydney. I can't understand it.
9
10 Q. You weren't allocated a place in a particular boat or Carley float?
11 A. Yes.
12
13 Q. You were?
14 A. My abandon ship station was number 6 Carley float. I'd like to see a
15 photo of it on the ship now under water, but there's none, nothing, no Carley
16 floats. No - there was two motor boats, there was one pinnace was shown on
17 the screen, I don't know where the other one is and two whalers, and you can't
18 find nothing, you see.
19
20 LEUT VESPER: I have no more questions, sir, no more questions.
21
22 THE PRESIDENT: All right, well, thank you very much, Mr House.
23
24 THE WITNESS: That's all right, Commission.
25
26 THE PRESIDENT: Very kind of you to see us today?
27
28 THE WITNESS: That's all right.
29
30 THE PRESIDENT: Thank you for having us to your house?
31
32 THE WITNESS: I still say although the Japs didn't commit to the war for a
33 fortnight, three weeks after, it is on file that half the fleet, Japanese fleet was in
34 the Indian Ocean, the other half was coming out of the China Seas of the
35 Pacific and it was a bit after that that they bombed Pearl Harbour, and I still say
36 that it was the Japs that finished the Sydney off really because if - according to
37 the Germans she was sailing on a south-easterly direction which is heading for
38 Fremantle, see. How could she be going there on horizon for Fremantle which
39 would be - if she's on the horizon that would be - say, 20 ks, 20 mile away and
40 yet she was found a couple of mile away, see.
41 THE PRESIDENT: That's one of the things I've got to look into, so all of this will
42 be resolved in the report in due course.
43
44 THE WITNESS: I hope so.
45
46 THE PRESIDENT: All right, thank you.
47

1 THE WITNESS: Who picked up all the debris? I could say two-thirds of the
2 ship's company is down below in the magazine, shell rooms, wireless rooms,
3 engine room and all that. There's a third roughly on the upper deck. There's all
4 the gun crews and torpedo crews, fire party, the first aids all them, they were all
5 on the upper deck, 160 of them, yet nobody - no doubt there was a lot of
6 casualties, but then again no way would you hang on to the side of the gun rail
7 and deliberately go down with your ship, so who picked up the survivors, if any,
8 and the sailor's hat will float for 12 hours, if his hammock happens to float that
9 will float for 24 hours because it acts as a life buoy and - no.

10

11 THE PRESIDENT: These are all matters I have to look into, so you'll have to
12 stay well and read my report, a little bit later on. Thank you very much indeed?

13

14 THE WITNESS: That's all right, Commissioner, my pleasure.

15

16 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW

17

18 THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ADJOURNED TO A DATE TO BE FIXED

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