

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE LOSS OF HMAS SYDNEY II

Before The Hon TRH Cole AO RFD QC

Held at level 5, 55 Market Street, Sydney

Counsel Assisting:    CMDR J Rush RFD QC RANR  
                          LEUT J Nottle RAN  
                          LEUT M Vesper RANR

On Tuesday, 2 September 2008 at 10am  
(Day 15)

1 CMDR RUSH: Good morning, sir. Mr Ravenscroft is the  
2 first witness, and LEUT Nottle will lead him.

3  
4 <JOHN JOSEPH RAVENSCROFT, sworn: [10.05am]

5  
6 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT NOTTLE:

7  
8 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. Mr Ravenscroft, for the record, please  
9 state your full name and your address?

10 A. John Joseph Ravenscroft. [REDACTED]

11 [REDACTED].  
12  
13 Q. Mr Ravenscroft, have you signed a statutory  
14 declaration in relation to your service in HMAS Sydney?

15 A. Yes.

16  
17 Q. And you have provided that to the Commission of  
18 Inquiry?

19 A. I have.

20  
21 Q. Have you had an opportunity to read through that this  
22 morning?

23 A. Yes.

24  
25 Q. And you're satisfied that it is true and correct?

26 A. I am.

27  
28 LEUT NOTTLE: Sir, I tender Mr Ravenscroft's statutory  
29 declaration. That appears at doc ID WIT.011.0173.

30  
31 EXHIBIT #43 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF JOHN JOSEPH  
32 RAVENSCROFT, WIT.011.0173

33  
34 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. Mr Ravenscroft, when did you first join  
35 the Navy?

36 A. I joined the Naval Reserve in Western Australia in May  
37 1939 and was called up the day before the war started and  
38 joined HMAS Sydney on 2 September 1939.

39  
40 Q. Whilst you were in Sydney, what sorts of duties did  
41 you perform?

42 A. The various duties that would be expected of an able  
43 seaman.

44  
45 Q. In particular, say, during cruising stations, where  
46 would your position have been?

47 A. Various positions: originally, manning Evershed

1 bearing indicators on the bridge, then more latterly on the  
2 4-inch gundeck.

3  
4 Q. During the time that you were manning the Evershed  
5 bearing indicators and the 4-inch guns, that was early on  
6 in your service when Sydney was under the command of  
7 CAPT Collins?

8 A. Yes.

9  
10 Q. Then at any stage during your time in Sydney, did the  
11 nature of your duties change?

12 A. Yes. As a result of what I believe to be excessive  
13 time on the Evershed bearing indicators, my eyesight  
14 deteriorated. In the Mediterranean, we received a draft to  
15 England to commission the Nizam and the other N-class  
16 destroyers, and CAPT Collins was upset that pretty well  
17 half his crew was going to disappear in the middle of the  
18 war. So the surgeon commander, who was an eyesight  
19 specialist, tested everyone medically, including their  
20 eyesight, and that was when they discovered that my eyes  
21 had deteriorated to the extent that my long-distance sight  
22 was not suitable for that of an able seaman.

23  
24 Q. So after that determination was made, your duties  
25 changed to what?

26 A. Once the determination was made, nothing changed for  
27 quite a while, but there was an administrative process  
28 going on. I had been recommended to do a course for an  
29 executive commission, and that was changed to a supply  
30 commission and the paperwork was commenced to change my  
31 rating from that of able seaman to writer.

32  
33 Q. Mr Ravenscroft, where was your position during action  
34 stations in Sydney?

35 A. "X" turret.

36  
37 Q. And that was your position at action stations  
38 throughout your time there?

39 A. Yes.

40  
41 Q. If you can indicate or describe approximately in rough  
42 detail what the nature of your duties was when you were at  
43 action stations in "X" turret?

44 A. During my time as an able seaman, I qualified for what  
45 was then known as the QR3, which gave me a particular duty  
46 in the turret. But really, everyone but the actual gunner  
47 was loading the shells and the propellants and preparing

1 the guns to be fired.

2

3 Q. During action stations or inside "X" turret, do you  
4 recall any sighting ports inside "X" turret, inside the  
5 turret, that would have allowed you or anyone inside to be  
6 able to see outside?

7 A. To the best of my knowledge, there were no such ports.  
8 Once we were inside the turret, we couldn't see anything  
9 outside. All we could see was the inside of the turret and  
10 what we were doing.

11

12 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Did you ever fire on local control?

13 A. Occasionally.

14

15 Q. How was that organised?

16 A. Good question, sir. It wouldn't have happened very  
17 often, but I'm sure it did probably happen a couple of  
18 times. I can't recall, honestly.

19

20 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. Mr Ravenscroft, if I can turn your  
21 attention specifically to your time in Sydney on Australia  
22 station, when you were at action stations would the 6-inch  
23 guns generally have been loaded?

24 A. Once you closed up to action stations, you didn't  
25 necessarily load the guns straightaway, but everything was  
26 there available to do it, and it would only take a couple  
27 of seconds to do it, anyway.

28

29 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Did you receive an instruction to  
30 load?

31 A. Oh, yes, yes. The phone in the turret was  
32 continuously manned day and night. If we were closed up  
33 all night, everyone in the turret would take turns at  
34 manning the phone.

35

36 Q. When you were at cruising stations, were any of the  
37 turrets manned?

38 A. Not normally.

39

40 Q. What about the 4-inch guns?

41 A. Oh, yes, the 4-inch gun deck was.

42

43 Q. So some of them at least were always manned, were  
44 they?

45 A. Yes, the 4-inch gun decks were manned pretty well  
46 24 hours a day.

47

1 Q. Do you know how many of the 4-inch guns were manned?

2 A. Each one of them.

3

4 Q. With a reserve crew, as it were?

5 A. Not the same crew that would man them at action

6 stations, yes, that's correct.

7

8 Q. But the ship was in a position to fire those 4-inch  
9 guns at any time?

10 A. Oh, yes, yes.

11

12 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. In terms of the time that it would take  
13 to go from cruising stations to action stations, once  
14 action stations was piped how long roughly would it take  
15 you to go from your spot during cruising stations to action  
16 stations?

17 A. That would depend on where you were at the time that  
18 the close up to action stations order was given. In my own  
19 case, if for argument's sake I was on duty manning one of  
20 the 4-inch guns, to get to "X" turret would take me  
21 a couple of minutes. But other members of the crew who  
22 were on various other duties would take longer than that  
23 because they had longer distances to travel, and some  
24 people had to change clothes as well. As a generalisation,  
25 it's really impossible to say, but the ship was trained to  
26 such an extent that everyone did it as quickly as they  
27 possibly could.

28

29 May I just add a point? The drills for closing up to  
30 action stations were continuously carried out irrespective  
31 of whether there was any intention to use the action  
32 stations or not, to make sure that the people could get  
33 there quickly and they knew exactly what they had to do.

34

35 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Yes, and there was a regular call to  
36 action stations at dawn, as I understand it; is that right?

37 A. No.

38

39 Q. Not?

40 A. No, not at dawn.

41

42 Q. When did you go to action stations?

43 A. When we were piped to action stations, but there was  
44 no regularity about it. An exercise could have been called  
45 at dawn on one day and then you'd never do it again for the  
46 next six months. I don't recall ever having any situation  
47 where there was a regular call to action stations. There

1 was either a drill or it was on purpose because there was  
2 going to be an action of some sort, or there might be an  
3 action of some sort.

4  
5 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. If I can take you back, Mr Ravenscroft,  
6 to your time manning the Evershed bearing indicators,  
7 roughly where were they located?

8 A. On the wing of the bridge.

9  
10 Q. And your duties when manning them would involve what?

11 A. Standing there, looking through them to see if there  
12 were any ships in the vicinity at all, and, if you did see  
13 a ship, reporting it to the officer of the watch.

14  
15 Q. In relation to identification of merchant ships, what  
16 was the most common method used to communicate with those  
17 merchant ships?

18 A. Light flash would be the most common, but sometimes  
19 flags were used.

20  
21 Q. Could you give an approximate distance of how far away  
22 you might be able to identify the signal flags on the  
23 merchant ships?

24 A. No, I could not. I could not.

25  
26 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Did merchant ships normally respond  
27 by flash or by flag?

28 A. Most of them would reply by flash, but some of them  
29 would hoist a flag signal of some sort.

30  
31 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. In terms of the uniforms that you were  
32 wearing during your time on Australia station in Sydney,  
33 can you describe the type of uniform that you would have  
34 been wearing?

35 A. The ship's company wore the dress of the day that was  
36 prescribed. In the tropics, it was shorts and shirt. If  
37 you were just working around the upper deck, it would be  
38 navy blue trousers and a shirt, and a top if the weather  
39 was cold. Some members of the crew who had duties that  
40 required them maybe to get dirty and so forth wore  
41 overalls. That would be the average.

42  
43 Q. When you say "in the tropics", can you give an  
44 approximate location of where you could change to tropical  
45 uniform?

46 A. It would depend on the time of the year, whether it  
47 was the wet season or the dry season in the tropics, but

1 I would say that if the ship was steaming north along the  
2 west coast, if you got somewhere around Carnarvon or  
3 somewhere like that, that would be where the order would be  
4 given to change the mode of dress.

5  
6 Q. What would be the dress for the officers?

7 A. They would wear white shorts and a white shirt. They  
8 didn't wear the full white dress uniform necessarily on an  
9 ordinary working day.

10  
11 Q. Would any of the sailors or officers be wearing  
12 overalls?

13 A. Oh, yes. The engineer officers would predominantly  
14 wear white overalls. I can't recall any of the upper deck  
15 officers wearing overalls.

16  
17 Q. But some of the sailors may have worn overalls as  
18 well?

19 A. Oh, yes.

20  
21 Q. Mr Ravenscroft, do you recall whether or not  
22 HMAS Sydney had Carley floats on board?

23 A. It certainly did.

24  
25 Q. I now want to show you a couple of photographs.

26  
27 Sir, these photographs are the same ones that we saw  
28 yesterday that are exhibits 41 and 42.

29  
30 Mr Ravenscroft, if I can ask you to direct your  
31 attention to the photograph with the 4-inch gun in it.

32 A. Yes.

33  
34 Q. That is a photograph out of the Olson book. Can you  
35 indicate if that's a picture of HMAS Sydney?

36 A. No.

37  
38 Q. You can't indicate?

39 A. I couldn't be sure. I don't understand the two boats  
40 that seem to be lashed to the side of the ship with  
41 a 4-inch gun above it. Certainly looking at the way the  
42 davits and the two Carley rafts in between the two boats -  
43 that was the way some of them were stowed, so there's  
44 a possibility that it is the Sydney, but I could not say so  
45 with certainty.

46  
47 THE PRESIDENT: Q. Sydney had Carley floats in that

1 position, did she?

2 A. Oh, yes, yes.

3

4 Q. Do you know the size of those?

5 A. No, I don't, sir. There were two sorts. There was  
6 a larger one and a smaller one. I'm sure they had some  
7 sort of classification. I may have known it at the time,  
8 but certainly I can't recall it now.

9

10 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. If I can now direct your attention to  
11 the second photograph --

12

13 THE PRESIDENT: That is exhibit 42.

14

15 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. -- which is from the Australian War  
16 Memorial, it is a picture which the summary describes as  
17 being the stern of HMAS Sydney, and it has a number of  
18 Carley floats at the stern of Sydney --

19 A. Yes.

20

21 Q. -- with a smaller Carley float inside the larger  
22 Carley float.

23 A. That's right.

24

25 Q. Does that accord with your memory of the two different  
26 types of Carley floats in Sydney?

27 A. Yes, it does, and that is the way they were stowed  
28 aft.

29

30 THE PRESIDENT: Q. The smaller one is known as  
31 a size 20, as it turns out, which is the same size as the  
32 one which is in the Australian War Memorial.

33 A. I have to admit, sir, that I was told that yesterday.  
34 But in giving this evidence, I don't feel that I can say  
35 anything that I was told yesterday.

36

37 THE PRESIDENT: No, quite.

38

39 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. Mr Ravenscroft, from your evidence  
40 earlier and from your service record, it shows that you  
41 were posted to Sydney for approximately just over two years  
42 or so?

43 A. That's correct.

44

45 Q. And a large part of that time was under CAPT Collins?

46 A. Yes, definitely.

47

1 Q. But also approximately five months was in Sydney when  
2 it was under the command of CAPT Burnett?

3 A. I understand that to be correct. I can't remember the  
4 actual date that CAPT Burnett took over command. From the  
5 records that I have, about five months would be correct.

6

7 THE PRESIDENT: Q. He took over 15 May 1941.

8 A. It was 15 May, then, until the date in November that  
9 I left.

10

11 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. In general terms, Mr Ravenscroft, can  
12 you indicate whether or not you noticed any great  
13 differences in the way Sydney operated under the two  
14 different captains?

15 A. In terms of the everyday operations, I would say that  
16 nothing changed. But, if I may, I'd like to add a rider to  
17 that. Because I had been changed over to a writer and was  
18 working in the ship's office well below decks and not  
19 wandering around the upper deck as an able seaman, things  
20 could have changed on the upper deck that I would not be  
21 aware of. In terms of the general operation of the ship  
22 and the drills and things like that, nothing seemed to  
23 change.

24

25 Q. Mr Ravenscroft, do you recall undertaking many  
26 passages in Sydney between Melbourne and Fremantle?

27 A. I recall making plenty of them.

28

29 Q. In general terms, do you recall the sea state and the  
30 weather conditions when you were going across the Bight?

31 A. The weather was always bad and crossings were rough.

32

33 Q. Do you recall a particular passage around 22 September  
34 1941 between Melbourne and Fremantle?

35 A. I don't recall it specifically, but I accept it as  
36 fact that it did happen.

37

38 Q. Is there any reason why you wouldn't have been on the  
39 ship?

40 A. Oh, no, I was there all right.

41

42 Q. Do you recall whether or not any damage was sustained  
43 to "A" turret during that trip?

44 A. No, I do not.

45

46 Q. There is evidence before the Commission that some  
47 damage may have been sustained to "A" turret during that

1 time. Do you recall whether or not, during your last  
2 passage in Sydney to the Sunda Strait in early October, you  
3 would have seen "A" turret trained to port for the entire  
4 trip?

5 A. No, I can't recall that. My view would be that if  
6 there was any damage done to "A" turret - and I certainly  
7 can't recall it happening - it would have been repaired in  
8 Fremantle before we sailed.

9  
10 THE PRESIDENT: Q. This will all become clear in the  
11 course of time. The captain wrote some reports about it,  
12 which we will get.

13 A. Well, as I explained outside this room, HMAS Sydney  
14 was an unstable ship, and certainly when crossing the Bight  
15 it was a tough ride.

16  
17 LEUT NOTTLE: Q. Mr Ravenscroft, just one last point. Do  
18 you recall if there was any system or recognition procedure  
19 for the identification of unidentified ships?

20 A. I'm sure that there was a fixed procedure that the  
21 officer of the watch and the signaller and the command went  
22 through, but exactly what it was I wouldn't know.

23  
24 Q. If you did encounter an unidentified ship, would you  
25 go to action stations?

26 A. Not immediately, I wouldn't think. But if there was  
27 any possibility that the captain had any doubts about that  
28 particular ship, definitely you would go straight to action  
29 stations.

30  
31 LEUT NOTTLE: Those are my questions, sir.

32  
33 LCDR RENWICK: No questions, thank you, sir.

34  
35 THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much indeed,  
36 Mr Ravenscroft. You have been very helpful. Thank you.

37  
38 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW

39  
40 THE PRESIDENT: I notice that Mr Ravenscroft has also  
41 advanced a submission to this Inquiry dated 20 June, and he  
42 provided submission number 118 to the parliamentary  
43 inquiry. Just as a matter of convenience, I will mark  
44 those exhibits 43A and 43B respectively.

45  
46 EXHIBIT #43A SUBMISSION OF MR RAVENSCROFT DATED 20/6/2008  
47

1 EXHIBIT #43B SUBMISSION 118 PROVIDED BY MR RAVENSCROFT TO  
2 THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY

3  
4 CMDR RUSH: Sir, I call Mr Johnson.

5  
6 <ALFRED GORDON JOHNSON, sworn: [10.31am]

7  
8 <EXAMINATION BY CMDR RUSH:

9  
10 CMDR RUSH: Sir, Mr Johnson has provided a submission to  
11 the Inquiry dated 20 July 2008.

12  
13 EXHIBIT #44 SUBMISSION OF ALFRED GORDON JOHNSON DATED  
14 20/7/2008

15  
16 CMDR RUSH: And, sir, a supplementary submission going to  
17 various matters to do with wireless telegraphy dated  
18 30 August 2008.

19  
20 EXHIBIT #45 SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION OF MR JOHNSON DATED  
21 30/8/2008

22  
23 CMDR RUSH: Q. Mr Johnson, is your full name Alfred  
24 Gordon Johnson?

25 A. Yes, that is correct, but I'm generally known as  
26 Gordon, by my second name.

27  
28 Q. What is your address?

29 A. [REDACTED]. [REDACTED]  
30 [REDACTED].

31  
32 Q. Are you a retired public servant?

33 A. Yes. I retired in 1983.

34  
35 Q. Mr Johnson, did you join the Royal Australian Navy on  
36 26 February 1940?

37 A. Yes, I did.

38  
39 Q. How old were you?

40 A. It was just before my 17th birthday. I was still 16,  
41 actually.

42  
43 Q. Did you undertake a wireless telegraphy course at the  
44 Flinders Naval Station?

45 A. Yes, I did.

46  
47 Q. Prior to that course, had you been a radio enthusiast