

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE LOSS OF HMAS SYDNEY II

Before The Hon TRH Cole AO RFD QC

Held at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Tasmania

Counsel Assisting: LEUT M Vesper RANR

On Thursday, 26 June 2008
(Day 5)

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THE PRESIDENT: I've come to the home of Mr Ken Brown in [REDACTED]
Victoria to take his evidence. Mr Brown is in his late 80's.

Also present is his cousin. Mr John Neal Brown, who was also on the
Sydney and who also will give evidence to me today.

<KENNETH TOM BROWN, sworn

<EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER

LEUT VESPER

Q. Sir, can you tell us your full name?

A. Kenneth Tom Brown.

Q. Do you live at [REDACTED]

A. Yes.

Q. Mr Brown, I'll show you a document. Is that a statutory declaration that
you made this morning?

A. Yes.

Q. It follows, doesn't it, that the contents of it are true and correct?

A. Yes.

LEUT VESPER: I tender that.

THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 11.

EXHIBIT #11 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF KENNETH TOM BROWN
DECLARED 26/06/08

LEUT VESPER

Q. Mr Brown, with the President's leave, I'm going to ask you just a few
more questions about matters you touch on in your statutory declaration.
Firstly, you served in HMAS Sydney II from March 1940 until December 1940;
that is so?

A. December 1940.

Q. December 1940?

A. Yes.

Q. You served in her as a signalman?

- 1 A. Yes.
- 2
- 3 Q. As I understand it, your action stations position was on the flag deck?
- 4 A. Yes.
- 5
- 6 Q. That was immediately aft of the bridge and below the bridge. Is that so?
- 7 A. Yes.
- 8
- 9 Q. Were there multiple machine gun mounts near or on the flag deck, can
- 10 you recall?
- 11 A. They were near the flag deck. I couldn't --
- 12
- 13 Q. You remember that they were manned when the ship went to action
- 14 stations. Is that so?
- 15 A. Yes.
- 16
- 17 Q. What I want to talk to you about this morning mainly, Mr Brown, is the
- 18 issue of challenging other ships. Do you understand?
- 19 A. Yes.
- 20
- 21 Q. In your statutory declaration in paragraph 18, you say that in your
- 22 memory whenever Sydney encountered an unidentified ship, be it a warship or
- 23 any other ship, she almost always went to action stations?
- 24 A. Yes.
- 25
- 26 Q. Is it the case that sometimes Sydney would not go to action stations?
- 27 A. Probably on occasions they weren't at full action stations, but they were,
- 28 you know, ready.
- 29
- 30 Q. Was that at cruising stations?
- 31 A. Yeah.
- 32
- 33 Q. With half the watch manning half the guns. Is that what you're saying?
- 34 A. Yes.
- 35
- 36 Q. Would that be the case until such time as a successful identification
- 37 occurred. Is that what you're saying?
- 38 A. That would stay at that station until it was cleared.
- 39
- 40 Q. In your next paragraph you refer to one incident when Sydney was
- 41 travelling to the Mediterranean and you say that you and your crew mates saw
- 42 a merchant ship on the horizon and you say:
- 43
- 44 We did not come to action stations but I was on watch on the flag
- 45 deck.
- 46
- 47 Then you say:

- 1
2 From what I understand from voice pipes the captain was satisfied
3 as to the ship's identification.
4
5 Firstly, can you remember that incident as you sit here now?
6 A. I can remember the appearance of a ship on the horizon and I would
7 estimate that it tallied up with all the ship identifications that they already had on
8 the ship. To be in that area at that time.
9
10 Q. What did you actually see with your own eyes of the other ship?
11 A. All you could see was just the silhouette of the ship on the horizon. You
12 couldn't identify it that much.
13
14 THE PRESIDENT
15
16 Q. How far away would it have been?
17 A. It would have been 10 or 15 mile away, I suppose.
18
19 Q. You had on board identification books, did you?
20 A. Yes, all the identification books was on the bridge. I was only on the flag
21 deck. They'd have all those books up on the bridge. I don't know what those
22 books were. I had seen them but, you know, when you were underway at sea
23 they were always - anything appeared - those books were on the bridge where
24 the captain was and everybody who was interested in what was happening.
25
26 Q. Was the practice, if you saw a vessel, to send a lamp signal asking it to
27 identify itself. Yes, they'd always be sent by light from the wing of the bridge.
28
29 Q. Would the captain go to action stations before he sent that signal or not?
30 A. No, I don't think so, not at that particular range. They'd have to have a
31 bit of suspicion about it to go to action stations.
32
33 Q. Can you remember any other occasion when a vessel was sighted which
34 wasn't immediately able to be identified?
35 A. No. In the Mediterranean we always had a destroyer escort which was
36 20 mile away in front of us and they'd already gone through all this procedure
37 when we come on the scene.
38
39 Q. You were always surrounded or protected by destroyers?
40 A. Yeah.
41
42 Q. The only occasions when Sydney had cause to identify vessels was on
43 the way over or the way back?
44 A. Yeah.
45
46 Q. You can recall only one occasion?
47 A. Only one, yeah.

- 1
- 2 Q. One occasion when that happened?
- 3 A. That's right.
- 4
- 5 LEUT VESPER
- 6
- 7 Q. Just finally, with that one occasion, Ken, if you can think about it for a
- 8 few more minutes, in your mind can you remember how long it took between
- 9 the first sighting of the ship and the captain satisfying himself as to the
- 10 identification of the other ship? Was it a matter of minutes or was it a matter of
- 11 hours?
- 12 A. No, it wasn't - it wasn't hours. It wouldn't have been that long.
- 13
- 14 Q. Would it have been half an hour, less?
- 15 A. Probably in that range.
- 16
- 17 Q. As far as you can recall, throughout that time the ship did not go to
- 18 action stations. Is that your memory?
- 19 A. No, I can't recall it but I wouldn't think so. The ship was such a great
- 20 distance away from I don't think it would have recalled going to action stations
- 21 at that stage.
- 22
- 23 Q. In your statutory declaration you then go on to talk about the challenge
- 24 and reply procedure for merchant ships and you say that:
- 25
- 26 We were taught and practised the challenge and reply procedure.
- 27
- 28 Q. That's the case?
- 29 A. Yes.
- 30
- 31 Q. Where were you taught that? Was that at Flinders Naval Depot, on
- 32 board or both?
- 33 A. On board. Most of the junior signalmen on board were still under
- 34 instructions on there. We used to go to instructions every day for an hour or so
- 35 just to get us up to date with what was happening.
- 36
- 37 Q. Who would teach you those things?
- 38 A. Well, there was a yeoman on board that used to do it, or a leading
- 39 signalman would take us on certain phases of the instruction.
- 40
- 41 Q. That senior rating would take you through the steps as to how a
- 42 challenge to an unidentified ship would occur?
- 43 A. Yes.
- 44
- 45 Q. Was that a set standard procedure or as you understood it, was it
- 46 something that was flexible?
- 47 A. It was a pretty set standard procedure.

1

2 THE PRESIDENT

3

4 Q. Normally you would go to action stations once the ship was sighted and
5 then you'd start the identification process. Is that usual or not?

6 A. I think it's probably - go for you. It would depend on what type of ship it
7 was. If it was a warship of course you would have gone to action stations
8 immediately, but if it was a freighter or some sort of a merchant ship, well, you
9 wouldn't have gone to action stations right away.

10

11 Q. It was for the captain to determine whether to go to action stations or
12 not?

13 A. If it was a merchant ship of some type they'd have the book of reference
14 and all the silhouette and everything in front of them right from the word go. It
15 wouldn't take them very long to decide whether it should have been there or
16 not.

17

18 Q. Do you know if they had a list of ships which they thought might be in the
19 area?

20 A. Yes, that was kept up to date, I imagine, daily.

21

22 Q. How did you receive notification of any ships that might be in the area?

23 A. That was always received by radio.

24

25 Q. Was it regularly done every day or twice a day, or once a week?

26 A. It was done regularly, yes.

27

28 Q. That came from Harman or?

29 A. It comes from Navy office, I think.

30

31 Q. Navy office?

32 A. I think, yeah, that was general to every ship, for every warship. They all
33 got notice at the same time.

34

35 Q. That was received in code, I take it, was it?

36 A. Yes.

37

38 LEUT VESPER

39

40 Q. As far as you understand that message was received in the wireless
41 office?

42 A. Yes.

43

44 Q. Do you know whether that daily signal had a special name, whether it
45 was called anything?

46 A. It was, but at this moment I can't recall what they called it.

47

- 1 Q. Was it the VAI, was it the daily VAI signal?
2 A. I couldn't - I couldn't remember.
3
4 Q. When you would daily practice the challenge procedure taught by the
5 leading ratings, would you be practising the challenge to other ships by lamp or
6 by flag?
7 A. No, you weren't - you were just doing it on your own ship. You weren't in
8 touch with anyone else.
9
10 Q. Was the challenge to merchant ships practiced with lamp or with flag or
11 by --
12 A. It would always be by lamp.
13
14 Q. When you served in the Mediterranean you and your fellow signalmen
15 would come on duty on the upper decks or conversely come to action stations
16 then come to the upper decks, what normally were the signalmen wearing?
17 A. Well, when you went to action stations you was wearing just what you
18 happened to be in. In mostly the rig of the day.
19
20 Q. Going on your memory what mostly was the rig of the day for the fellows
21 during the Mediterranean campaign?
22 A. Shorts and shirt.
23
24 Q. What colour?
25 A. They had to be white.
26
27 Q. Did any of the signalmen ever wear overalls when --
28 A. Only when you were doing some strange job. Under normal
29 circumstances you would be in the rig of the day.
30
31 Q. Was that the case for both the signalmen who were on the flag deck and
32 the signalmen who would be working on the bridge and the bridge wings?
33 A. That would be the same all-round and the main signal office right next
34 door to you.
35
36 Q. As I understand it, on the bridge there would be probably three
37 signalmen; there would be the chief yeoman of the signals and, I think, the petty
38 officer junior to him?
39 A. A yeoman, yes.
40
41 Q. Then a leading hand?
42 A. A leading land, at least two signalmen on either wing.
43
44 Q. Throughout the Mediterranean campaign those seven or so signalmen
45 who when on the bridge or the bridge wing they would be in white shirts and
46 shorts?
47 A. Yeah.

- 1
- 2 Q. The officers who were on the bridge around the bridge wings they would
3 have been in white.
- 4 A. Yeah.
- 5
- 6 Q. That's the case for the summer months. Is that so?
- 7 A. The summer months, yeah.
- 8
- 9 Q. From where you served on the flag deck you had a good view of the
10 4 inch gun deck. Is that the case?
- 11 A. Yeah.
- 12
- 13 Q. I take it when the ship went to action stations, as far as you can recall,
14 the 4 inch guns were always manned when the ship went to action stations?
- 15 A. Yes.
- 16
- 17 Q. Have you got a memory of what those fellows were wearing, the fellows
18 servicing the 4 inch guns throughout action stations in the Mediterranean
19 campaign?
- 20 A. I can't remember whether they were in the regular gear or whether they
21 had special rig, but I know they would have had anti-flash gear and all of that
22 sort of stuff.
- 23
- 24 Q. Incidentally did the signalmen when you went to action stations did the
25 signalmen where anti-flash hoods and gloves?
- 26 A. No, I can't recall it.
- 27
- 28 Q. Were the signalmen, including yourself, wearing any life preserver or any
29 other safety gear at action stations such as a Mae West?
- 30 A. I can't recall - I know we had it, and we had it with us, but whether we
31 were wearing it or not I'm just not sure, I can't recall it.
- 32
- 33 Q. When you say you had it with us, do you mean that somewhere on the
34 flag deck?
- 35 A. Yeah, you had it available.
- 36
- 37 Q. What safety gear did you have available? You're talking about a life
38 vest, a gas mask, tin hat?
- 39 A. Yes, you had all those.
- 40
- 41 Q. If there was an emergency they were available to be put on. Is that so?
- 42 A. Yeah.
- 43
- 44 Q. You left the Mediterranean, you yourself, that is in December 1940, but
45 before that in the last few months you served in Sydney, do you remember that
46 Sydney undertook a passage to the Dardanelles?
- 47 A. Yes.

- 1
- 2 Q. In fact, in your statement do you say you remember seeing ANZAC
- 3 Cove?
- 4 A. With a good pair of glasses. We were told it was ANZAC Cove. All you
- 5 could see was this coastline which is we thought it was right.
- 6
- 7 Q. At about that time, perhaps two days before you saw ANZAC Cove you,
- 8 according to your statement, and in fact this is from your diary, you said that:
- 9
- 10 Sydney, perhaps in company with some destroyers, encountered
- 11 some merchant ships.
- 12
- 13 That's in your statement?
- 14 A. Yeah.
- 15
- 16 Q. Do you have any memory as you sit here now of those days when
- 17 Sydney encountered some merchant ship?
- 18 A. Well, anything that we encountered while I was on that trip we had
- 19 destroyers in company, would have already been checked by the destroyer and
- 20 we was, you know, told that it was all right.
- 21
- 22 Q. Sydney herself, did she challenge any of these ships?
- 23 A. No, not after they'd been.
- 24
- 25 Q. You say that you recall Sydney sending a boat to board one of these
- 26 ships. Do you have a memory of that?
- 27 A. All I can remember is that we lowered a boat to go to a ship at one stage
- 28 and I couldn't tell you where it was or when it was, but I can remember the boat
- 29 being lowered and shafted off, but just where it was, I can't remember.
- 30
- 31 Q. Do you know which of Sydney's boat was the one boarded and sent
- 32 over?
- 33 A. It was a power boat.
- 34
- 35 Q. You don't know which particular power boat it was?
- 36 A. No.
- 37
- 38 Q. Can you recall how far away the other ship was, that the motor boat went
- 39 to?
- 40 A. It would have to be a few mile away.
- 41
- 42 Q. When that occurred can you remember whether Sydney had closed up
- 43 at action stations or not?
- 44 A. I would imagine they would have closed up, yeah.
- 45
- 46 Q. Can you remember that or is that what you think probably happened?
- 47 A. We would have gone to action stations.

1
2 Q. Why do you say that?
3 A. Well, if there was any suspicion at all you don't muck about. It's no good
4 being there if you're not ready.
5
6 LEUT VESPER: I don't know if that's a convenient time to have a short break,
7 Mr President?
8
9 THE PRESIDENT: Yes.
10
11 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
12
13 THE PRESIDENT: Mr Brown, I notice from your diary which is attached to your
14 statement that you noted in your diary on 18 May 1940:
15
16 German raider reported to be laying mines off North-East African
17 coast.
18
19 Did your ship get that information by signal, do you know?
20 A. That would have come by radio. I imagine that would have been a
21 general signal to all the Navy ships that were at sea.
22
23 Q. Was that announced generally to the crew or did you hear about it
24 because you were in the signal's department?
25 A. Because I was in the signal's department.
26
27 Q. I also note that in your diary for 26 May 1940 you noted that:
28
29 Sydney is now in the Mediterranean, Mediterranean sea, the Med
30 is now closed to allied merchant shipping and contains the largest
31 British Naval force to be centered there.
32
33 I suppose that's the reason why you didn't encounter merchant ships whilst you
34 were in the Med?
35 A. That's right, yeah, only merchant ships you encountered whilst you were
36 there were in convoy.
37
38 Q. In convoy under escort?
39 A. Under escort, yeah. And usually under air attack.
40
41 Q. In your diary, for 19 July when you were dealing with one of these battles
42 that Sydney was engaged in, I think it was the Colleoni, you noted that:
43
44 We scored direct hits with our first two salvos at 19,000 yards.
45 A. Yes.
46
47 Q. Were most of the battles that you fought in the Mediterranean were

1 fought at distances like that?
2 A. Yes.
3
4 Q. 19, 20,000 yards?
5 A. Most of them would be in - they'd be a long range.
6
7
8
9 Q. At long range?
10 A. At long range, yes.
11
12 Q. Sydney had a good capacity?
13 A. They had a very good guns crew.
14
15 Q. At distance?
16 A. Yeah.
17
18 Q. The other thing I noted in your diary on 12 October that:
19
20 She gave chase in one occasion reaching 34 knots of speed.
21 A. Where was that?
22
23 Q. On 12 October 1940. The ship received indication that there were
24 cruisers in the vicinity, enemy cruisers in the vicinity and you sighted the coast
25 of Italy, smoke was sighted and it says:
26
27 At 0810 smoke was sighted on the horizon and we gave chase
28 reaching 34 knots having slipped PV's adrift to give more speed.
29
30 Q. Paravanes, PVs are Paravanes?
31 A. Paravanes. We must have had a wind behind us too to get 34 knots out
32 of her.
33
34 Q. She was rated 32, roughly?
35 A. She could do 32 easy enough.
36
37 THE PRESIDENT: I have no other questions. Do you have any more
38 questions?
39
40 LEUT VESPER: No, sir.
41
42 THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Brown, you've been very
43 helpful?
44
45 THE WITNESS: That's the best I can remember anyway.
46
47 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW

1
2 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
3
4 THE PRESIDENT: With me is Mr John Neal Brown, as I said, the cousin of the
5 previous Mr Brown who also served on Sydney.
6
7 <JOHN NEAL BROWN, sworn
8
9 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER
10
11 LEUT VESPER
12
13 Q. Sir, can you tell us your full name?
14 A. John Neal Brown, N-E-A-L, Brown.
15
16 Q. Sir, do you live at [REDACTED] ?
17 A. I do.
18
19 Q. Sir, have you made a statutory declaration in respect of the matter
20 before the commission dated 6 June 2008?
21 A. I do, I have.
22
23 Q. It follows from swearing that that the contents of it are true and correct?
24 A. I do.
25
26 THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 12.
27
28 EXHIBIT #12 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF JOHN NEAL BROWN
29 DECLARED 06/06/08
30
31 LEUT VESPER
32
33 Q. Mr Brown, with the commission's leave, I'm just going to ask you a few
34 questions arising out of the matters touched upon in your statutory declaration.
35 You served in Sydney from July 1939 until leaving it in December 1940. Is that
36 so?
37 A. That's right.
38
39 THE PRESIDENT
40
41 Q. You were about 18 years of age when you were on board?
42 A. Yes, going on 19.
43
44 LEUT VESPER
45
46 Q. What was your rank when you served in Sydney?
47 A. Telegraphist. I was promoted from ordinary telegraphist to telegraphist.

- 1
- 2 Q. When did that promotion occur?
- 3 A. I cannot really remember.
- 4
- 5 Q. Was it whilst you were serving on the ship?
- 6 A. Whilst we were on the Sydney, yes.
- 7
- 8 Q. Perhaps you could just explain to the commission, what was the
9 structure of the wireless telegraphy department. That is how many sailors at
10 each rank, roughly speaking?
- 11 A. You mean at one time, the complement of the communication?
- 12
- 13 Q. Yes?
- 14 A. About 20, 25, from the chief, chief telegraphist, from POs, leading
15 telegraphist down - right down the ranks to ordinary telegraphist.
- 16
- 17 Q. During cruising stations at sea, where would you close up when you
18 were on duty?
- 19 A. At cruising stations you'd be off duty. You wouldn't be on duty, but you'd
20 be - at cruising stations, I think you would be wearing a life jacket and safety
21 gear.
- 22
- 23 Q. Was the telegraphy branch, were you broken down into watches; some
24 would be on watch, some would be off watch?
- 25 A. Yes.
- 26
- 27 Q. When you were on watch where would you close up at?
- 28 A. Mainly in the main office. There's the main office, the second office and
29 the third office.
- 30
- 31 Q. That's the main wireless office?
- 32 A. Yes, the main wireless office.
- 33
- 34 Q. What were the wireless sets in the main office; can you recall?
- 35 A. Not really.
- 36
- 37 Q. Okay. There were also wireless sets in the other wireless offices?
- 38 A. Yes, yes.
- 39
- 40 Q. When you went to action stations where would you close up at?
- 41 A. Well, the only one that I remember, as I recall I mentioned to you, was in
42 A turret; gun turret.
- 43
- 44 Q. You had a period that you served in that turret?
- 45 A. Yes, yes.
- 46
- 47 Q. As far as your action stations position it was always in A turret?

- 1 A. No, no, but that's the first one that I can recall that I served on my action
2 station. The other action station would have probably been in the second or
3 third office; wireless office, yeah.
4
- 5 Q. When you were at sea in Sydney, do you ever recall Sydney transmitting
6 a wireless message?
7 A. No, no.
8
- 9 Q. Why are you so sure about that?
10 A. Because we probably wouldn't have the reason to. It would be done by
11 a senior officer, or senior ship. We were bound to wireless - W/T silence when
12 at sea.
13
- 14 Q. I take it therefore that essentially at sea your job as a wireless operator
15 was to listen?
16 A. To listen, yes, yes.
17
- 18 THE PRESIDENT
19
- 20 Q. Throughout the Australian coast you would normally listen to Harman?
21 A. Yes, yes.
22
- 23 Q. As you went north into the Indian Ocean you would change to
24 Singapore, would you?
25 A. Yeah, probably Singapore, yes.
26
- 27 LEUT VESPER
28
- 29 Q. Do you remember from time to time Sydney would receive intelligence
30 signals?
31 A. Yes.
32
- 33 Q. Would they be coded signals in Morse?
34 A. Yes.
35
- 36 Q. What was the procedure for handling intelligence messages when they
37 were?
38 A. They would go straight to probably the cipher officer, yes.
39
- 40 Q. Were they decoded by the wireless personnel?
41 A. No, no.
42
- 43 Q. Do you remember from time to time or daily, indeed, receiving any
44 signals to do with known shipping in your area of operations?
45 A. No, I wouldn't know what they were, no, but I would think that that would
46 be a daily exercise, reception. We'd get a daily informing of what ships we
47 could expect, yes.

1
2 THE PRESIDENT
3
4 Q. That was received in code --
5 A. In code.
6
7 Q. And in Morse, by Morse rather?
8 A. Yes, yes.
9
10 LEUT VESPER
11
12 Q. Did you know whether that signal or that type of signal had a special
13 name or a specific name?
14 A. No, I cannot recall. It probably would have had, but I don't recall.
15
16 Q. Is your recollection that that type of signal was received every day?
17 A. As my memory serves me correct I think it would have been received
18 every day as identification of merchant ships and what have you, yes.
19
20 Q. In your statement you also mention that Sydney had a radio telegraphy
21 capacity. That's so, isn't it?
22 A. Yes, RT, yes.
23
24 Q. In your time in Sydney do you ever remember the radio telegraphy
25 system being used?
26 A. Not really, no, not really.
27
28 THE PRESIDENT
29
30 Q. It was for very short range communication?
31 A. Very short range, yes. Mainly it was done by Aldis lamp or signals, light
32 for lamps, yeah.
33
34 LEUT VESPER
35
36 Q. If the radio telegraphy system was used, in what scenario was it used;
37 was it used for ship to land or ship to ship?
38 A. Just ship to ship, yeah.
39
40 Q. Did you know what the range for the transmission of a radio signal was?
41 A. Probably a matter of a few mile, yes.
42
43 Q. Was that something you were taught or something you learnt or while
44 you were working?
45 A. Must have been while we were in the Med because I don't recall doing
46 any previous training in our initial wireless telegraphy training in Cerberus, no.
47

1 Q. You think it was whilst you were in the Mediterranean that you learnt how
2 the radio worked?

3 A. Yes.

4

5 Q. Is it true that training that you learnt that it could only be used for ranges
6 of up to two miles?

7 A. Yes.

8

9 Q. Or a few miles, I beg your pardon?

10 A. Yes.

11

12 Q. It's been suggested when Sydney engaged with the Kormoran that she
13 made a radio broadcast from perhaps up to 120 or more miles from the
14 Western Australian coast and that radio broadcast was received in Australia. Is
15 that something you could concede ---

16

17 THE PRESIDENT

18

19 Q. In plain language?

20 A. Yes, it could possibly be in plain language too because there was no
21 purpose in disguising your position. It was already known.

22

23 LEUT VESPER

24

25 Q. Are you talking about a wireless transmission?

26 A. Yes, yes.

27

28 Q. But what about a radio broadcast?

29 A. A radio telegraphy, no, no, absolutely not.

30

31 THE PRESIDENT

32

33 Q. So voice --

34 A. No voice.

35

36 Q. -- messages could not be sent over 100 miles?

37 A. No. To the best of my knowledge I would say no, absolutely no.

38

39 LEUT VESPER

40

41 Q. Throughout your war service did you become familiar with direction
42 finding equipment?

43 A. Not really. It wasn't in our department, it had a special branch. As the
44 years progressed during the war it became more of a special branch. The first
45 one I recall - first of direction finding is what they call RDF, radio direction
46 finding, but that was in its more or less infancy in the Mediterranean. I don't
47 think we had it.

1

2 Q. As far as you're aware, did HMAS Sydney have direction finding?

3 A. To the best of my knowledge, no.

4

5 Q. Did any of the ships you served in after you left HMAS Sydney have
6 direction finding equipment?

7 A. In later years, I think so, yes. Getting back to the Med I think one of the
8 aircraft carriers had RDF, radio direction finding, to the best of my knowledge.

9

10 Q. Is that something you have learnt since the war or did you know that at
11 the time?

12 A. At the time, yes.

13

14 Q. How did you know that?

15 A. Just general knowledge in the communication field, yes.

16

17 Q. When you say later on in the war you became familiar with direction
18 finding equipment, was it the case that the fellows in the wireless branch, were
19 they responsible for operating the direction finding equipment?

20 A. No, they had a special branch, special operators trained in direction
21 finding.

22

23 Q. I think part of your training also included how to do jury aerials. Is that
24 so?

25 A. Yes.

26

27 Q. Can you give us a summary of what you were told about how in, say, a
28 cruiser, one goes about the process of rigging a jury aerial? How does one do
29 it?

30 A. First of all you had to have some structure there to rig it. In other words
31 the mast, the foremast and the aft mast. If there was nothing there to rig it on
32 you couldn't rig it, but that's what we were trained to rig it on the existing mast
33 heads.

34

35 THE PRESIDENT

36

37 Q. Without masts, you couldn't have rigging and therefore you couldn't send
38 any signals at all?

39 A. No, no. You could probably try but I don't think the range would be very
40 good. You could probably try, but the range wouldn't be good.

41

42 LEUT VESPER

43

44 Q. If a cruiser, say, like Sydney, still had its two masts or the better part of
45 two masts how long would it actually take to rig a jury aerial, a transmitting
46 aerial?

47 A. This would only be an educated guess, probably an hour or half an hour,

1 not very long in an emergency.

2

3 Q. Did Sydney carry spare cable for that purpose?

4 A. Yes, yes.

5

6 Q. Spare rigging gear?

7 A. Yes.

8

9 THE PRESIDENT

10

11 Q. Where would that be kept, below deck somewhere?

12 A. Probably, yes, probably one of the offices, probably the second or third
13 office, yes.

14

15 LEUT VESPER

16

17 Q. Receiving aerials, were they different to transmitting aerials?

18 A. Yes, yes.

19

20 Q. Were receiving aerials also able to be jury rigged?

21 A. That's a good question. I would think so, yes, I would think so. They
22 were already directed down from the mast, just abaft; well abaft of the bridge.

23

24 Q. Again, would you estimate that it would take perhaps half an hour to an
25 hour to rig a receiving aerial?

26 A. Yes, no more than half an hour, yeah.

27

28 Q. It would be a bit easier because you'd only need one mast for a receiving
29 aerial?

30 A. Yes.

31

32 Q. If, say, Sydney lost one or most of its masts and the jury aerial for
33 transmitting had to be rigged very low to the superstructure of the ship perhaps
34 using part of the superstructure of the ship for the anchor point, any idea how
35 far it could transmit?

36 A. Not really, but the range would be considerably reduced.

37

38 Q. When one has full height of the masts to rig its receiving aerials, as you
39 say, you could be sitting out in the Indian Ocean and you could receive Harman
40 quite easily?

41 A. Well, off the Western Australian coast. I don't think we transferred to,
42 say, Singapore until we were well into the Indian Ocean, but the other point is it
43 can be - messages could be relayed, say, from Darwin to Harman or Harman to
44 Darwin to the ship if it couldn't be raised, you know, direct.

45

46 THE PRESIDENT

47

- 1 Q. There were transmitting stations at Harman, we know?
2 A. Yes.
3
4 Q. And at Darwin?
5 A. Yes.
6
7 Q. What about Applecross?
8 A. Applecross.
9
10 Q. In Western Australia, in Perth?
11 A. Never heard of it.
12
13 Q. Never heard of that?
14 A. We never - to my knowledge we never had any direction contact with
15 Applecross.
16
17 Q. You think you had contact with Harman and with Singapore, you recall?
18 A. Yes.
19
20 Q. Any others in Australia?
21 A. No, probably on the distress side of it we would probably listen out on a
22 distress all the time and that was - if we were in the Indian Ocean or off the
23 Western Australian coast we would listen to Perth, but that's the civilian station.
24
25
26
27 Q. The distress band was 500 kilocycles?
28 A. 500 k's, yes.
29
30 LEUT VESPER
31
32 Q. In an emergency situation would you broadcast on the distressed
33 frequency?
34 A. I don't ever recall doing so.
35
36 Q. Later in the war you were involved in an action referred to in your
37 statutory declaration?
38 A. In Timor.
39
40 Q. On that occasion, do you recall whether your ship made an emergency
41 broadcast?
42 A. Yes, in plain language.
43
44 Q. Firstly, why was it you broke radio silence in that case? Obviously, you
45 were ordered to, but do you understand why?
46 A. Because, we were in a very, very hot seat and our ship was damaged
47 and we were heading back to port.

██████████

████████████████████

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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