

1 THE PRESIDENT: I've come to the home of Mr Ernest
2 Briddick in (redacted) to take evidence. Mr Briddick is
3 88 years of age.

4
5 Mr Briddick, thank you for seeing me today and
6 agreeing to assist this Commission in to the loss of HMAS
7 Sydney II.

8
9 <ERNEST WILLIAM BRIDDICK, sworn

10
11 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER

12
13 LEUT VESPER

14
15 Q. Sir, can you tell us your full name?

16 A. Ernest William Briddick.

17
18 Q. Do you live at (redacted)?

19 A. That's correct.

20
21 Q. Mr Briddick, I just show you a two-page statutory
22 declaration, is that the statutory declaration which you
23 declared just a few moments ago?

24 A. Yes.

25
26 Q. It follows that the contents of it are true and
27 correct?

28 A. That's so.

29
30 LEUT VESPER: I tender that, Mr President.

31
32 THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 5.

33
34 EXHIBIT #5 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF BY ERNEST WILLIAM
35 BRIDDICK DECLARED 23/06/08

36
37 LEUT VESPER: Mr President, with your leave I may ask some
38 questions which expand upon exhibit 5?

39
40 THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

41
42 LEUT VESPER

43
44 Q. Mr Briddick, could you tell us when was it that you
45 served in HMAS Sydney II?

46 A. When was it, is it from - well it's recorded here on
47 my, you know --

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

Q. You joined her in October 1939, is that your recollection?

A. Yes, it's written here. And as I said in my testimony, the arrival dates of the Sydney in Fremantle would be accurate. Any reference to a departure date would be not accurate.

Q. You served in HMAS Sydney II until May 1941, is that your recollection?

A. 1 May 1941.

THE PRESIDENT: So the date in paragraph 3 is wrong, isn't it?

LEUT VESPER: I think it is.

THE PRESIDENT: What should that be?

LEUT VESPER: That should be 1939, Mr President.

THE PRESIDENT: I will amend that in the copy.

LEUT VESPER: Thank you.

Q. Your category as a sailor in Sydney was as a signalman, is that so?

A. Ordinary signalman, then signalman and I went to Canopus, which is the name for the Gibraltar Service Station, and I passed there for the VS3 lower grade. That's also recorded in this sheet.

Q. Mr Briddick, one of the things that the Inquiry is interested in the manner with which Sydney was challenging other ships that it came across from time to time. As you say in your statement in paragraph 5, warships, as far as you can recall, how were they challenged by Sydney?

A. I can't even remember.

Q. For example, if a warship, as far as you can recall when you were on duty on the flag deck, If a warship was encountered and its identity --

A. Was not known.

Q. -- not known, can you recall what method or methods were used to send a signal to that other ship?

A. Well, usually you would find that the signalman was

1 responsible for the lookout for other ships. And
2 generally speaking they were sighted by Sydney generally
3 before they were sighted by anybody else. And I can't
4 remember what we used to - what we used to do to ask them
5 to identify themselves. As I recall they would send back
6 their fleet number. It depends on who was responding to
7 the signal that I was making and what their particular
8 procedure was. But if there were a number of ships then
9 presumably the head of the convoy, in the case of a number
10 of warships, would respond with their - perhaps their
11 number or VIP light fleet or something like that.

12
13 Q. Is your memory that those signals were coming back by
14 way of lamp or flag?

15 A. Generally speaking, you'd be too far away to do
16 anything else. Because most of the time you would, from
17 the crow's nest in particular, you would see oncoming
18 ships or ships on a diverging course. You would see them
19 from the crow's nest before the bridge saw them. And you
20 would communicate by voice pipe that this was the voice
21 pipe speaking and there was ship at red 24, or red 25. Or
22 if you had occasion to add to that and say there's not one
23 ship there's now three, or four or five, as the case may
24 be. And in most cases the crow's nest, not at action
25 stations, would be in touch with those people and they
26 would then be challenged by the bridge. And they would
27 then pass out to the signalman on duty, which is probably
28 the chief yeoman of signals at that time, and he would
29 make the challenge by Aldis lamp.

30
31 Q. Would that be from one of the bridge wings?

32 A. Probably from one of the bridge wings.

33
34 THE PRESIDENT

35
36 Q. Do you recall what distance you could see from the
37 crow's nest?

38 A. Well, it would have to be in the horizon plus. I
39 could see ships from that lookout up to five minutes
40 before the bridge could see them. And so that's got to be
41 the horizon plus a number of miles, but I'm not sure how
42 many.

43
44 LEUT VESPER

45
46 Q. Mr Briddick, I've asked you about your memory of
47 challenges to warships. When merchant ships were

1 challenged, as far as you can recall, during your time in
2 Sydney under Captain Collins, was the challenge to
3 merchant ships done by way of flag or lamp or both?

4 A. Honestly, I can't remember challenging an uncertified
5 ship in the Mediterranean at any time while I was on
6 Sydney.

7
8 Q. Nor on its return journey when it came via East
9 Africa?

10 A. Well, you couldn't get in to the Mediterranean except
11 by the Suez Canal, that's the only way to get in. That
12 would only take one ship at a time.

13
14 Q. As I understand it, your service in Sydney was that
15 part of a training for prospective officers?

16 A. No, it was a very hurriedly put together by someone
17 in Melbourne, which was Cerberus. Now, I was recommended
18 to go for this course and there were three of us, I think,
19 from the Sydney who got into it. But of those, I think
20 from memory, four were signalman.

21
22 Q. Just so I understand it, are you talking about the
23 course you did when you left Sydney?

24 A. The course when I left Sydney had nothing to do with
25 signals at all. It was all sorts of other things, running
26 a boat, firing guns, all this sort of stuff. And in the
27 finish I was - four people were signalmen and none of them
28 made it. There were only nine in the course all together.
29 Four got made officers, sub lieutenants, and five didn't.
30 And of the five who didn't make it, of which I was one,
31 were all signalmen. Now, why the hell they sent us there,
32 I don't know. But this was a, you know, a whole room full
33 of brass there. And I don't think many of them had much
34 sea time at all between the lot of them.

35
36 Q. Was it the case that some of the sailors who had
37 joined Sydney upon its return from the Mediterranean, were
38 you aware that some of those were sailors that were doing
39 the pre-officer course?

40 A. When I was first landed in that course there were
41 only nine bodies altogether. It was the first on in its
42 class. Somebody on board the ship recommended me to go to
43 the thing, anyway. I went but didn't make it, so that was
44 that.

45
46 THE PRESIDENT

47

1 Q. What was the distance that you could signal by lamp
2 to another ship?

3 A. To another ship, well, I suppose until his
4 superstructure got in to view and that would be in many
5 cases horizon plus something, because they can return a
6 signal as soon as the lamp is visible to the sending
7 officer.

8
9 Q. They could be read at that distance?

10 A. Yes. Yes, one of them was an 18 inch lamp. And
11 that's a big lamp.

12
13 LEUT VESPER

14
15 Q. If I show you a photograph, Mr Briddick, of Sydney,
16 can you see the 18 inch lamp on it?

17 A. Nay, I can't on this one. I thought though I might
18 be able to when I looked at it in the sunlight but I
19 couldn't see it. But there was one on the starboard side
20 and one on the port side.

21
22 Q. Are you talking about of the flag deck?

23 A. Yes. Yes, they were located on the - the flag deck
24 is all sort of on the one level. Then you've got your -
25 your flag deck is in front of 4 funnel and the 18 inch
26 lamps are on the same level. And you choose which one you
27 use, depending on the circumstances which apply at the
28 time. Now, when we had that action with Bartolomeo
29 Colleoni, there's a note in here --

30
31 Q. You're referring to this book?

32 A. This book, it's called, "Cruiser Duel", and you will
33 note in there that they sent a signal to the destroyers to
34 finish it off with torpedoes. By this time the Bartolomeo
35 Colleoni was stationary with the bow blown off and I used
36 the 18 inch lamp to call the destroyer, who was no more
37 than a couple of hundred yards on our port side slightly
38 ahead of us. And the reason I used the 18 inch lamp - I'm
39 going back to conditions now - was because I thought all
40 the signalmen were on the port side which was nearest to
41 the Colleoni. And they were too busy watching the
42 Colleoni get slaughtered and weren't paying much attention
43 to what was going on. Eventually they answered. But I
44 used the international call sign, common call sign, "A0,
45 A0". And I did that because I knew they'd be all watching
46 what was happening to the Colleoni. So, that's the sort
47 of circumstances I mean when I say you used what you

1 thought was the appropriate lamp in that time. Now, I was
2 the one mentioned in the book, not by name, but it's
3 there, that a signal was sent to the head of the destroyer
4 fleet to finish off the Colleoni with torpedoes. And you
5 will see in my photographs a photograph of the Colleoni
6 being struck by two of them. Does that explain what
7 occurred?
8

9 Q. It does. What I also wanted to ask you about with
10 your photographs, if I could, Mr Briddick, was just some
11 questions about what people would wear at action stations.
12 You have kindly supplied a page of five photographs and
13 what I might do is have you explain to Mr Cole what one
14 can see in each photograph in terms of what each person is
15 wearing and where they are in the ship, if you don't mind?
16 A. Well, all of those people were signalmen.
17

18 Q. I might start with the photograph on the far left of
19 the page and then we'll go through them in clockwise
20 order. I don't know how well you can see that, but
21 firstly the fellow in that photograph?
22 A. This one was me. I don't think I can identify the
23 others.
24

25 Q. In that photograph, the one on the far left of the
26 page, you've got your gas mask on?
27 A. Yes.
28

29 Q. Your tin hat?
30 A. Yes.
31

32 Q. You're in white shorts?
33 A. Right.
34

35 Q. And a white shirt, and you look like you've got your
36 life preserver --
37 A. My Mae West there.
38

39 Q. Is the Mae West a vest?
40 A. No, that's a floatation like - you blow it up,
41 hopefully you can puff enough wind in to get afloat.
42

43 Q. Is that held to you by a belt?
44 A. It's wrapped around your neck and waist.
45

46 Q. When you served in Sydney in the Mediterranean
47 Campaign, when you were at action stations, was that what

1 you would normally be wearing, that uniform?

2 A. No, not necessarily. Unless there was actually
3 poison gas in the air somewhere that you had been advised
4 of that - then you would be told to wear - to wear the gas
5 mask.

6

7 Q. What about the other clothes, when you were at action
8 stations in the Mediterranean would you be wearing white
9 shorts and shirt or would you be wearing overalls, or?

10 A. No, well it would depend. I don't know what the
11 officer people used to wear but some of them were wearing
12 long pants and a coat.

13

14 Q. What about the ordinary signalmen?

15 A. I can't recall, actually. I know that we had very
16 little protection against misadventure, if that's the
17 word.

18

19 THE PRESIDENT

20

21 Q. That's one of the big signal lamps behind you in the
22 lower photograph, is it not?

23 A. Yes, that would be so. That looks like the 18 inch
24 to me. Perhaps that's where I saw the picture on.

25

26 LEUT VESPER

27

28 Q. You're looking at the photograph in the middle of the
29 bottom of the page?

30 A. That's right, yes. That's the 18 inch.

31

32 Q. Is that you, one of the fellows in the photograph?

33 A. No, I took the photos or most of them. Yes, that's
34 right, that is the 18 inch lamp. Well, that's big enough
35 for anybody to see. And I think it ran by a carbon
36 process, so I'm not sure. quite.

37

38 Q. Do those photographs all appear to be taken on the
39 flag deck?

40 A. Yes. Yes, all taken on there. And the 18 inch lamp
41 appears in quite a number of them, doesn't it?

42

43 THE PRESIDENT: It does.

44

45 LEUT VESPER: What I propose to do, Mr President, is
46 organise to have a set of copies of those photographs made
47 and I'll tender those.

1
2 THE PRESIDENT: Would you mind if we borrowed these and
3 had them copied and returned to you, or would you like
4 someone to come here?

5
6 THE WITNESS: Well, I'd really prefer not to let them go.

7
8 THE PRESIDENT: All right, we'll get someone to come here
9 and take pictures of them, if that's all right?

10
11 THE WITNESS: Right. If you're interested in pictures of
12 themselves, apart from the nature of the Inquiry, you can
13 take whatever photographs you like.

14
15 LEUT VESPER

16
17 Q. You mentioned before the yeoman of the signals, did
18 you ever go to action stations on the bridge or on either
19 of the bridge wings when you had served in the Sydney?

20 A. At my ranking I wouldn't be on the bridge. But all
21 the action stations other than the lower steering
22 position, where I was with Commander Hilken, they were
23 all, all on the flag deck.

24
25 Q. But as far as you were aware there were the yeoman of
26 the signals and other signal ratings closed up on the
27 bridge or the bridge wings when the ship was at action
28 stations?

29 A. We were all up there, except for the one in the lower
30 steering.

31
32 Q. That was with the commander, the second-in-charge of
33 the ship, Commander Hilken?

34 A. That's right.

35
36 Q. Is it correct to say that when Sydney went to action
37 stations Commander Hilken would have been closed up in
38 that lower steering position?

39 A. Well, I would think so. Not always - not always the
40 same signalman would go. There was a signalman and a
41 wireless telegraphist used to go with him. I can't
42 remember who else was, because it was pretty small, there
43 was a wheel in it which enabled you to give instructions
44 if the bridge got blown away. But you got in there by a
45 little manhole.

46
47 Q. In to the?

1 A. In to the lower steering position. And if they
2 sprung a leak or got hit with a shell or something they'd
3 just close it and trap in, really, an that's - you've had
4 it.

5
6 LEUT VESPER: I have just one final question,
7 Mr President.

8
9 Q. That is to do with a Aldis Lamps, Mr Briddick, as I
10 understand it there were also on the flag deck, one or two
11 Aldis lamps stowed in lockers, is that your memory?

12 A. There was about four cartons, from memory, four
13 pigeon hole cartons, each of which held a single flag.
14 And the signal flags in various reconstructions or
15 constructions were containing a message for all ships to
16 do certain things. And that's the way they operated and
17 that's the way they had to.

18
19 Q. As I understood it, Mr Briddick, there were Aldis
20 lamps in addition to the fixed signal lamps --

21 A. Yes.

22
23 Q. -- stowed on the flag deck, is that right?

24 A. I can't remember where they were stowed.

25
26 Q. When signalmen were aloft in the crow's nest would
27 they have a signal lamp?

28 A. No, the communication was direct to the bridge.

29
30 LEUT VESPER: Well, thank you, Mr President, they are my
31 questions of Mr Briddick.

32
33 THE PRESIDENT

34
35 Q. Mr Briddick, in paragraph 6 of your statement you
36 say:

37
38 A merchant ship when challenged would generally
39 reply with its name and its secret code. We
40 wouldn't automatically go to action stations
41 upon sighting another ship. Often their
42 identity was established very quickly by lamp
43 from a long distance.

44
45 Do you recall the circumstances in which you did go to
46 action stations on sighting a ship?

47 A. No, I can't remember.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

Q. You would just receive a direction from the captain, presumably, by way of a clanger or signal?

A. Yes, I can't remember who used to pass out the signal for the day, I think it must have been a daily process. I imagine someone in the signal branch would know what it was and where he got the answer as to what the correct reply would be. I can't recall ever challenging on a warship, a merchant one at all.

Q. The Mediterranean may have been closed to merchant shipping when you were there, I think?

A. Well, it pretty well was closed.

Q. Most of the challenging that you did, or identification that you did, would have been with other warships?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you recall how long it took if, for instance you were in your hammock, or wherever you may have been, it would take to get to action stations once action stations were signalled?

A. Well, if I were on the mess deck and they called action stations I would be at my service station, or my action station, within a couple of minutes.

LEUT VESPER: I just have one other matter if I could, Mr President?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

LEUT VESPER

Q. Even though, Mr Briddick, you have no recollection of Sydney challenging a merchant ship, were the signal ratings taught a particular procedure for how a challenge to an unidentified ship should occur?

A. No, I don't recall that. Someone must have been aware of the secret signal that was required to establish the whereabouts of the point of entry in the cargo. Someone must have provided a signaller with some kind of a known response which he would look for. My understanding was that the target ship, in the case of the Sydney procedure, was that you didn't know the answer. You didn't know what the reply should be.

1 THE PRESIDENT: You did say you had a photograph album,
2 would you mind if I had a look at that and --

3
4 THE WITNESS: No, not at all.

5
6 THE PRESIDENT: -- if there are any photographs that might
7 be of use to my Inquiry I'd like to have arrange for
8 someone to come and take some copies.

9
10 THE PRESIDENT: Have you seen this Lieutenant Vesper?

11
12 LEUT VESPER: I haven't, sir, no. Would it be appropriate
13 to perhaps adjourn while you look at those photographs?

14
15 THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

16
17 SHORT ADJOURNMENT

18
19 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW

20
21 THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ADJOURNED TO TUESDAY, 24 JUNE
22 2008, AT 9.30AM

23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46