

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE LOSS OF HMAS SYDNEY II

Before The Hon TRH Cole AO RFD QC

Held at the Western Australian Maritime Museum,
Fremantle, Western Australia

Counsel Assisting: LEUT M Vesper RANR

On Tuesday, 24 June 2008
(Day 3)

1 THE PRESIDENT: I'm at the Western Australian Maritime
2 Museum in Fremantle to take the evidence of Mr Gordon
3 Lavender who is 88 years of age. Yes, Lieutenant Vesper.

4
5 LEUT VESPER: Thank you, sir. I call Mr Lavender.

6
7 <GORDON CLAIR LAVENDER, sworn

8
9 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER

10
11 LEUT VESPER

12
13 Q. Sir, can you tell this Commission of Inquiry your
14 full name?

15 A. Gordon Clair Lavender.

16
17 Q. Sir, do you live at (redacted)?

18 A. I do.

19
20 Q. Sir, I just show you a document and ask you, sir, is
21 that a statutory declaration that you declared this
22 morning?

23 A. Yes.

24
25 Q. I take it that the contents of it are true and
26 correct?

27 A. Yes.

28
29 LEUT VESPER: I tender that.

30
31 THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 5.

32
33 EXHIBIT #5 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF GORDON CLAIR LAVENDER
34 DECLARED 24/06/08

35
36 LEUT VESPER

37
38 Q. Mr Lavender, with the President's leave, I'm just
39 going to ask you a few questions which arise out of some
40 of the matters that you touch upon in your statutory
41 declaration, but firstly I just want to confirm you served
42 in HMAS Sydney II between June 1938 and September 1941.
43 Is that so?

44 A. That's right.

45
46 Q. The questions I'm going to ask you concern your time
47 in HMAS Sydney. Firstly, I want to take you to the

1 operation of 4 inch guns. Now, firstly, it's correct,
2 isn't it, that you're on watch cruising stations position
3 and your action stations position in Sydney was as the
4 trainer on the starboard forward 4 inch gun mount?

5 A. Yes.

6
7 Q. Although, I think, there was some change in April
8 1941, is that so, that is you, I think, changed your
9 cruising stations position to be in the high angle
10 director?

11 A. Head trainer and I and - yeah.

12
13 Q. I want to take your attention to the operation of the
14 4 inch guns and in particular ask you some general
15 questions about the elevation of the guns, how they could
16 be depressed and so on. Firstly, when the 4 inch guns
17 were loaded could they be loaded at the horizontal or at a
18 different angle; can you recall?

19 A. No, they would have to be loaded at an angle
20 elevation, because they would be too high - you may do it,
21 I wouldn't like to say you could or you couldn't. Usually
22 they were on an angle, because the layer would have the
23 guns on target type of thing, and manoeuvre the guns at
24 whatever angle, you would push the projectile up into the
25 main brace(?).

26
27 Q. I think it's the case in your experience most of the
28 time the 4 inch guns were being fired at high altitude
29 targets?

30 A. Yes.

31
32 Q. Did you have any experience of firing the 4 inch guns
33 at the horizontal?

34 A. Once in the Aegean Sea when we were attacked by motor
35 torpedo boats, we opened fire on them.

36
37 THE PRESIDENT

38
39 Q. Were the 4 inch guns used against other ships or just
40 against aircraft?

41 A. No, only aircraft, usually.

42
43 LEUT VESPER

44
45 Q. Except for the one occasion when the motor boats --

46 A. Yeah, because they were fast and you wouldn't use
47 actually the main armament on them so we open fire with

1 4 inch, yeah.
2

3 Q. As far as you can recall, the 4 inch guns were
4 depressed at the horizontal. Is that so?

5 A. Would have been then just about, yes.
6

7 THE PRESIDENT
8

9 Q. What was the range of the 4 inch guns?

10 A. 20 - is this on tape?
11

12 THE PRESIDENT: Yes.
13

14 LEUT VESPER
15

16 Q. If you're not sure, say so?

17 A. I'm not sure but I can if I look at a bit of paper I
18 could tell you, it's 28,000 feet, I think it is.
19

20 Q. When you went to action stations on the 4 inch guns,
21 were the guns loaded automatically by the crew, or would
22 you await an order?

23 A. Open fire, the moment they said, "Open fire", you
24 would load the first projectile into the breech and it
25 would more or less fire as you loaded it, because your
26 hand moved away as the bridge closed. They were called
27 buttress thread breeches because they pushed your hand
28 away and automatically closed, and as soon as it fired it
29 would be opened and the projectile would shoot out of the
30 empty cylinder, but it bounced on the upper deck, on the
31 gun deck, and another one would be gone in by the time
32 that happened, you know.
33

34 Q. How long would it take between the order being given
35 to load and the guns being fired?

36 A. Only seconds.
37

38 THE PRESIDENT
39

40 Q. Did you receive an order to load or an order to fire
41 or both?

42 A. Well, I think it was "open fire", that would be the
43 word "open fire" would come --
44

45 Q. I see.

46 A. It's a bit - to make dead sure, you know, certain,
47 I'd say it would be you'd wait until the "open fire" word

1 would come, because you wouldn't set the fuse until they
2 say, "Open fire" and a light would burn.

3
4 LEUT VESPER

5
6 Q. What was the standard rate of fire that could be
7 achieved with the 4 inch guns, in your recollection?

8 A. Well, only what I heard. I never did it myself.
9 Twenty rounds a minute, but whether that's really true or
10 not, but that's in peace-time they used to have a practice
11 to see what they could do. I don't know, could have been
12 somebody's talk, that's what they reckon, they used to
13 have a bit of a competition or something, but when we'd
14 open fire against aircraft, well, you know, you are
15 pumping a few shells out within 5, 10 minutes, you know,
16 if you kept on firing, because they fire and more or less
17 the breech opened and closed and they're firing again,
18 type of thing, it's like, repeating just like that.

19
20 Q. In the action you spoke about with the motor boats
21 where the guns were being fired at the horizontal --

22 A. Well, they were, as far as I can remember just about,
23 yeah, because you're on a surface craft, you see you're
24 not up in the air, so they may be at a little angle
25 because of the trajectory of the projectile, you know.

26
27 Q. Did the fact that the guns were at the horizontal
28 slow down the rate of fire, because it took longer to load
29 them?

30 A. No, I don't think it would have, not really.

31
32 Q. Can you recall whether there were different types of
33 ammunition for the 4 inch guns?

34 A. No, no, I couldn't, because the only ones we used was
35 the time fuse ones, set to explode at a different heights;
36 whatever the heights they'd explode at.

37
38 Q. Mr Lavender, the next topic I want to take you to
39 concerns the various boats in HMAS Sydney --

40
41 THE PRESIDENT: Just before you do that.

42
43 Q. When action stations was called what did you do?

44 A. It all depends where I was. Now, if I was on the
45 mess desk you just grab your gas mask and run flat out to
46 your action stations. You just wouldn't walk, you'd run,
47 because see how quick you could close up even in practice,

1 it would only be minutes, and you'd run, because the chaps
2 on the guns most likely had to go somewhere else, you know
3 what I mean. You know, different positions in the ships,
4 blokes had to go to all different parts of the ship, so
5 you just - no matter what you had on more or less you'd
6 just run. You wouldn't wait to put a good suit on, you'd
7 just run, you know, and take up your action stations,
8 jumping on the trainer platform and the crew would be
9 closed up more or less. It only takes minutes to close a
10 ship up at action stations, yeah.

11

12 Q. Were there any occasions when you went to action
13 stations where it was thought there were no aircraft
14 involved, or did you always assume that there might be
15 aircraft involved?

16 A. In the Mediterranean every time you went to sea we
17 used to get bombed practically. I think we had 80 air
18 raids on us somebody claimed, yeah, usually had - not too
19 often you didn't get an air attack because they had pretty
20 close - didn't have to fly far to, you know.

21

22 Q. When action stations were called you would go to your
23 station and you would be in a position where you could
24 fire rapidly?

25 A. Open fire any time they --

26

27 Q. If the order was given?

28 A. That's right, yes.

29

30 LEUT VESPER

31

32 Q. Now, Mr Lavender, I've got some drawings of Sydney.
33 These are taken from National Archives document MP551/1.
34 They show both an overhead view and a side view of Sydney,
35 and in particular shows the various ship's boats.

36

37 THE PRESIDENT: I'll just mark that exhibit 6.

38

39 EXHIBIT #6 ORTHOGRAPHIC DRAWING OF HMAS SYDNEY II FROM
40 NATIONAL ARCHIVES DOCUMENT MP551/1

41

42 LEUT VESPER

43

44 Q. Now, Mr Lavender, I just want you to take a few
45 minutes and look at it and tell me the boats that one can
46 see on that plan, were they the boats you can recall that
47 Sydney embarked during your time serving on her?

1 A. Well, they are correct bar the two boats which I
2 think were the whalers down on the quarterdeck opposite X
3 turret. Sydney never had them.

4
5 Q. I see?

6 A. But the rest of them; the two whalers, the two motor
7 boats, your pinnace, your gig and the two cutters is
8 correct, yeah.

9
10 THE PRESIDENT

11
12 Q. So that's seven boats, is it?

13 A. Yes, plus the jolly-boat which you'd put five in if
14 you're lucky.

15
16 Q. Okay, so you had two cutters?

17 A. Two cutters, two motor boats, a pinnace, a gig and
18 two 27-foot whalers. Now, to put - there's no way you
19 could save 645 men with those boats. You couldn't get
20 them in it for a start, so if you jump in the water you're
21 not going to survive anyway, even if you've got the Carley
22 floats and there's 645.

23
24 Q. During your time in Sydney you served as a member of
25 the various small boats parties; that is right?

26 A. Well, I was coxswain of the power boats; the motor
27 boats.

28
29 Q. I see?

30 A. The 35-foot motor boat, yeah.

31
32 Q. As far as you could tell were those boats capable of
33 being holed and still floating, in other words, did they
34 have floatation devices?

35 A. Not to my - if they've got a hole through them they
36 take water. That's my knowledge. I can't remember
37 anything - the only the lifesaving was your life-belt that
38 you had in the boats, you know.

39
40 THE PRESIDENT

41
42 Q. They were all timber boats?

43 A. Well --

44
45 Q. Apart from the Carley floats?

46 A. Yeah, they're all - well, the clinker-built boats
47 were the whalers and the cutters, the rest of them were

1 carvel-built, what they call carvel-built, so they're
2 smooth, you know, smooth. The pinnacle and the motor
3 boats, they would be made out of timber, I imagine, they
4 weren't made out of - I don't think they were made out of
5 steel, no; some kind of timber, yeah.

6
7 LEUT VESPER

8
9 Q. Did they have any lifesaving equipment in them?

10 A. Only the life jackets, each thwart had a life jacket
11 over it and the motor boats did too. They would have some
12 life gear in there for the officers in the cabin, you
13 know, I imagine, yeah.

14
15 THE PRESIDENT

16
17 Q. They were in addition to the life jackets that
18 everybody had on board?

19 A. Oh, yeah, yeah, everybody had their own personal
20 blow-up life jacket, yes.

21
22 LEUT VESPER

23
24 Q. For deploying the various ship's boats, there were
25 various davits and cranes. Is that so?

26 A. One crane would lift out all the boats bar the two
27 cutters. They would be lowered on the davits with the
28 falls.

29
30 Q. The two cutters, they were lowered by davits, but all
31 of the other boats would have to be lowered via the ship's
32 crane?

33 A. Because they're too big and too heavy, and you
34 couldn't just pick them up and shift them. Had to be
35 lifted out. They're 35 foot long and 27 foot long boats,
36 you know, you just can't pick them up.

37
38 Q. At sea, if a captain wished to quickly deploy a boat
39 which boat would he be likely to use?

40 A. The cutter, the sea boats that are out there ready to
41 put in the water, emergency.

42
43 THE PRESIDENT

44
45 Q. On the davits?

46 A. On the davit, yeah.

47

1 LEUT VESPER

2

3 Q. How would that boat be deployed? In other words,
4 would the men get into the boat whilst it was still --

5 A. Whilst it was still secured to the davits up level
6 with upper deck they get in it. It was like scrambling
7 nets going up to it, you get into the boat, put your life
8 jacket on, they would be lowering you down to the water,
9 when the orders came to lower, and you'd be stopped about
10 that far above it, and the order would be out pins and
11 they just yell out, "Slip", and you pull the lever like
12 that and you fall into the water from about that height.

13

14 Q. Would Sydney or any ship deploying such a boat would
15 it have to reduce its speed for that evolution?

16 A. I would say they would be doing about 5 knots through
17 the water.

18

19 Q. While the men were getting into the boat whilst it
20 was still inboard the ship, I take it, could still sail at
21 whatever speed it wished?

22 A. Yes, reduce the revolutions.

23

24 Q. The ship would only have to slow down to 5 knots at
25 that moment when the cutter was put into the water?

26 A. Yeah, that's right. Yes, if they leave the cutter
27 there they just take off again.

28

29 Q. Normally all of the ship's boats, would they be
30 secured to --

31

32 THE PRESIDENT: Just before you go on.

33

34 Q. You were on board Sydney for three and a quarter
35 years, I think?

36 A. Yes.

37

38 Q. Were those boats launched on many occasions?

39 A. Not that many occasions. In February each year when
40 we went to Hobart all the boat would be in the water then.

41

42 Q. This is for a regatta?

43 A. Everybody would be training at 6 o'clock in the
44 morning, going for a two mile ride up the Derwent River so
45 they were all used then, but generally the whalers, one
46 might be used. If you're at Hervey and Sydney Harbour
47 recreation party might want to go - they might want to go

1 sailing in it, so they'd use all of the whalers. All
2 boats wouldn't be in the water at the same time. The
3 pinnacle would be in the water, the two motor boats would
4 be in the water tied up at the boom that goes out, that
5 you walk out down the rope ladder into the boats, so
6 that's their position there. While you're tied up at the
7 buoys, say number one buoy there at Farm Cove, you get
8 your boom out, got your two motor boats and the pinnacle on
9 it. The whalers would be still in their position on the
10 ship, unless it was put in the water for a specific
11 reason. Some of the officers might decide they wanted to
12 go sailing the Saturday afternoon, you know, little things
13 like that. The boat would be put in the water, but
14 otherwise would still be - you know, but the motor boats
15 and the pinnacle are the work boats; the motor boats for
16 carting the officers to one ship or going ashore to Man o'
17 War Steps and the pinnacle were taking the troops, or going
18 over to Garden Island to pick up something and things like
19 that, you know, yes.

20
21 Q. Did you ever practice at sea launching any of the
22 boats?

23 A. Not that I can put my finger right on it. I think we
24 used to put the cutter in the water now and again because
25 I can remember grabbing on to the rope and running around
26 pulling away from the ship. I think they did a few
27 practices like that, in peace time, but you wouldn't do it
28 at sea during the war, we never did it at sea during the
29 war.

30
31 Q. What about practising sending a boarding party?

32 A. No, no, never practised sending a boarding party to
33 another ship or anything. No cargo ships or anything -
34 any ships we met. We never - just during war time, but in
35 peace time you wouldn't even think about it.

36
37 LEUT VESPER

38
39 Q. Not only did you never practice sending a boarding
40 party, it never happened in actual real combat, you didn't
41 have to send a boat?

42 A. No. Now, I tell you what - a thing they used to do
43 in the navy in peace time they have an evolution day and
44 they'd pipe over: place a hard boiled egg on the bridge,
45 see how quick the cooks would operate, or away whaler's
46 crew, now, you had to put the whaler in the water by the
47 crane, get the crew in it and row around the ship or

1 something, see how quick you could do it, things like that
2 they used to do.

3

4 THE PRESIDENT

5

6 Q. That was only in peace time?

7 A. Yes, in peace time. They never did it during the war
8 time, no.

9

10 LEUT VESPER

11

12 Q. Getting back to the 32 foot cutter, how long would it
13 take to firstly man the cutter then have it put in the
14 water?

15 A. In the water?

16

17 Q. If one wished --

18 A. If you hurry you could do it in about 5 minutes, easy
19 - less because the boat's got to be lowered, you just -
20 the rope's coming off the blocks down on to the davit
21 around a cleat and you gradually slacken it off like that,
22 you've got three or four blokes on it, holding on to it,
23 and he's working it - letting it slide. The boat's going
24 down like that to the water, so it is obviously a matter
25 of minutes that - it can be done - from the blokes got in
26 that boat 5 minutes, I reckon, could be in the water.
27 That's my idea. If you lowered it straight away.

28

29 THE PRESIDENT

30

31 Q. Did you ever practice abandoning ship?

32 A. Never, no.

33

34 Q. Never?

35 A. No, not in peace time.

36

37 Q. What about in war --

38 A. Not during the war, no, no, I never ever practised
39 it.

40

41 LEUT VESPER

42

43 Q. Did each of the crew, though, have a muster point
44 where they --

45 A. No, no, we never had - like the guns crew up where I
46 was, nobody said, well, you've got to go to that number 1
47 whaler, or 2 whaler, you know, you know, we were really,

1 when you're thinking about it, how are you going to put
2 all those hundreds of men into those boats? You can't, so
3 you'd be - you know, if the ship sunk you're in the water,
4 you're struggling in the water, not everyone can get there
5 - the boats are damaged, they're useless. So, if there's
6 200 in the water at 5 o'clock tonight by 8 o'clock in the
7 morning they're most likely all dead, they've frozen, cold
8 water, they can't survive and when the Sydney went down
9 nobody got out there for three days, didn't they, or
10 something.

11

12 Q. Did the ship boats have stores of fresh water or --
13 A. Had a little keg of water and I think they had - and
14 a - Very's pistols and they may have had dry biscuit, I
15 can't swear it, but they had - I think they had dried
16 biscuits or in there.

17

18 Q. Was that the case of all the ship's boats or just
19 some of them?

20 A. Well, that was in the whalers and that was in the
21 cutters and that would be, but, you know, this is a
22 thought that when you worked on the ship it never entered
23 your head how you got off it, it didn't in mine, in peace
24 time you never thought about abandoning ship, you never
25 thought about it sinking, so, that was in the brain that,
26 you didn't think, now, how am I going to get off the ship.
27 It never entered your head.

28

29 Q. Over the time you served in Sydney, was there any
30 change to the ship's boats, in other words, did some get
31 taken off or put on?

32 A. No, not to my knowledge.

33

34 Q. In relation to the Carley floats in Sydney, as far as
35 you're aware, was there any change to the number or type
36 of the Carley floats?

37 A. No, only the two getting put on the quarterdeck, but
38 it was there - it wasn't there at peace time, so wherever
39 they come from, I'm not quite sure.

40

41 Q. Your memory is that at the beginning of the war two
42 Carley floats were stationed on the quarterdeck. Is that
43 so?

44 A. No, not in peace time they weren't, no. Though
45 during the war - it happened during the - over in the
46 Mediterranean or somewhere, they were down, put down
47 there. Now, whether they came from in front of the

1 forward funnel on that air intake section there to the
2 boiler room and taken and put down there that's what I
3 can't swear on.

4
5 THE PRESIDENT

6
7 Q. How many Carley floats were on board, to your
8 recollection?

9 A. Two on the anti-aircraft gun deck and two on the
10 quarterdeck with a small one inside one other.

11
12 Q. That's five?

13 A. That is the clear memory I've got, yeah.

14
15 Q. Four bigger ones and one smaller one?

16 A. Yeah. Unless they got some smaller ones after I left
17 in September but I don't think they would have, because
18 the ship, when I left it, went straight to Fremantle, you
19 see.

20
21 LEUT VESPER

22
23 Q. I'll just show you some photographs, Mr Lavender.
24 Firstly a photograph which is marked A. What does that
25 show?

26 A. That shows the pinnace taking a heap of sailors
27 ashore to have a swim at Hervey Bay in Queensland in 1939.
28 before the war.

29
30 Q. That pinnace was the same pinnace that Sydney had?

31 A. Same pinnaces, yes.

32
33 THE PRESIDENT: I'll mark that exhibit 7A. That seems to
34 have about maybe 25 or 30 sailors in it.

35
36 EXHIBIT #7A PHOTOGRAPH, MARKED A, OF A PINNACE
37 TRANSPORTING SAILORS ASHORE AT HERVEY BAY, QUEENSLAND, IN
38 1939

39
40 LEUT VESPER

41
42 Q. I'll show you another photograph, Mr Lavender.
43 Again, can you tell us what that shows?

44 A. That shows whoever did it caught a shark. Now, where
45 we were, or where, I don't know, but it was in peace time,
46 it wasn't during the war years, they must have been
47 anchored somewhere and they had caught shark and they

1 lifted it up by the crane just to take a photo of it, but
2 I can't give more detail. It was just a photo that I had.

3

4 Q. In the background one can see --

5 A. A whaler.

6

7 Q. A whaler, thank you.

8 A. And they're painted dark with a white bottom on them,
9 is that around underneath.

10

11 LEUT VESPER: Thank you, I'll tender that too,
12 Mr President.

13

14 THE PRESIDENT: I'll mark that 7B, photograph of the
15 whaler.

16

17 EXHIBIT #7B PHOTOGRAPH SHOWING A WHALER ON HMAS SYDNEY II

18

19 THE WITNESS: You see the kind of chocks they sit in. On
20 that, you can. The saddle, they call the words.

21

22 THE PRESIDENT

23

24 Q. Though I think I can see it?

25 A. Like that underneath the hull of it, yeah, that's
26 called --

27

28 Q. Sitting in a cradle?

29 A. Cradle, yeah. They had one forward and one aft, you
30 see.

31

32 Q. The boats are secured in the cradle, are they?

33 A. That's right, with - we call them bottle crew stops,
34 you see, it's like a clamp that goes over the gunnel and
35 they're secured to those saddles and you just screw them
36 up tight. People I think - if you'd walked into a shop
37 you'd ask for a tabernacle or something, I think, like.

38

39 Q. That's so that the boats would not move at sea?

40 A. That's right, keep them steady, because the ship
41 rolled like that, you know, when you hit a rough sea, you
42 know when we're coming down from Darwin before the war she
43 was really rough, I tell you.

44

45 LEUT VESPER

46

47 Q. When the ship went to action stations were those

1 restraints --

2 A. Still on them.

3

4 Q. When the ship went to action stations were those
5 restraints released on the ship's boats?

6 A. Not to my knowledge, no.

7

8 Q. If the ship were to sink would those boats simply
9 float off, float free?

10 A. Not unless those things were taken off.

11

12 Q. Is that the case for all of the ship's boats?

13 A. Well, I'd say so, I'd say so, because if you had a
14 motor boat or that pinnace sitting there loosely and the
15 ship was rolling where would it end up, so they had to be
16 secured there somehow to hold them in that position. They
17 would be sliding around, you know.

18

19 THE PRESIDENT

20

21 Q. The same with the Carley floats, they would be
22 secured in some fashion?

23 A. Well, the ones on the - they had a rope, cross ropes
24 like that across them, you know, just like had to hold
25 them up, stand them on their edge, you know.

26

27 LEUT VESPER

28

29 Q. I'll show you another photograph, Mr Lavender. Can
30 you tell us what that shows?

31 A. That is a photo of myself and another chap, I can't
32 think of his name now, on the forecastle of the Sydney in
33 Fremantle Harbour in 1940, early or '39.

34

35 Q. You are both wearing overalls?

36 A. Blue overalls and I've got a white - like a diver's
37 jacket on, sweater on, but I wouldn't be wearing that
38 walking around in a ship. This is in either Saturday
39 afternoon or after 4 o'clock when you were doing what you
40 want to do, you know. We might have been down, had a
41 shower, combed our hair and run up there and had a photo
42 taken, but I wouldn't have wore that on the quarterdeck,
43 like, I wouldn't be dressed like that on the quarterdeck,
44 I tell you that.

45

46 Q. When you were at sea during war time, other than for
47 ceremonial occasions, what were the seamen wearing on the

1 upper decks?

2 A. Usually have overalls on.

3

4 Q. Blue overalls?

5 A. Blue overalls on, you wouldn't be dressed up in a
6 number 3 suit or anything like that.

7

8 Q. If you were called to action stations most fellows
9 would be wearing blue overalls on the upper decks?

10 A. Yeah, yeah, half the blokes in the turrets would be
11 and everything, yeah, it all depends what gear you had -
12 what clothes you were wearing at the time, you know.

13

14 LEUT VESPER: I'll tender that photograph, sir.

15

16 THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 7C.

17

18 EXHIBIT #7C PHOTOGRAPH OF GORDON CLAIR LAVENDER WITH
19 ANOTHER ON THE FORECASTLE OF HMAS SYDNEY II IN FREMANTLE
20 HARBOUR, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

21

22 THE WITNESS: That could have been taken just before war
23 was declared or just after war declared in '39 or just
24 after Christmas in '40. Before we went over to the Middle
25 East.

26

27 LEUT VESPER

28

29 Q. Just staying with uniforms and clothing for a few
30 more minutes, Mr Lavender. When Sydney returned from the
31 Mediterranean and served in Australia and New Zealand
32 thereabouts, the uniforms or the clothing that people were
33 wearing on the upper decks at sea, did that still
34 remain --

35 A. Still the same.

36

37 Q. Still the same?

38 A. Yes, still the same, yes.

39

40 Q. That's the case for the seamen on the ship; correct?

41 A. Yes, the stokers would be dressed in overalls, they
42 never wore anything else but overalls.

43

44 Q. On the upper decks therefore we would have people
45 managing the guns and signalmen for instance they would
46 all be mainly wearing blue overalls. Is that so?

47 A. Well, signalmen may be in the dress of the day

1 because they're not doing any dirty work, you know,
2 they're not working generally, either work in the office,
3 if their on watch, or they're on the flag deck and the
4 yeomen and signalmen on the bridge they would be in the
5 dress of the day, number 3's, blue uniform.
6

7 Q. If they're in the dress of the day in summer what
8 would those signalmen and the yeomen of the signals be
9 wearing --

10 A. White shorts, white shirt, black long stockings and
11 the cap.
12

13 Q. In summer at sea, can you recall what the officers
14 were wearing?

15 A. They would all wear whites, in the summer rig; white
16 shorts, white shirt, white stockings, white shoes and
17 their peak cap.
18

19 Q. There's two more photographs I wanted you to look at.
20 The next one, if I could show you that and ask you what
21 does that show?

22 A. That's the forecastle of the Sydney. I would say we
23 were coming down from Darwin, when that photo was taken
24 with a head sea, and A turret was trained to starboard.
25 The reason why, I can't tell you. It may have been that
26 turret was closed up which would be closed up at cruising
27 stations, it may be the director trained on to something
28 and that turret followed it. The officer of the turret
29 might have said something, it's hard - I wouldn't be able
30 to say why it was trained like that, but if the director
31 trained on to something that turret would have trained on
32 to something if there was anything. They might have just
33 had that little bit of a practice, you know, they used to
34 do little things.
35

36 Q. Were you ever aware of the forward turret, A turret,
37 being trained outboard when Sydney was travelling in heavy
38 sea? Was that something you were aware of?

39 A. No, no, always trained fore and aft. For that
40 reason, being like that, would have been if the director
41 had moved, perhaps, I reckon. If the director had just
42 turned they might have followed it, you see.
43

44 LEUT VESPER: I tender that.
45

46 THE WITNESS: It's hard to say really without being there,
47 what reason.

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THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 7D.

EXHIBIT #7D PHOTOGRAPH OF FORECASTLE OF HMAS SYDNEY II
SHOWING 'A' TURRET TRAINED TO STARBOARD

THE PRESIDENT

Q. Just looking at this picture, the 6 inch guns.
They're trained at a different angle to the rear turret?

A. Of B turret.

Q. Of B turret?

A. Yes, B turret, yeah. Now, that's what I just said,
that either the director had trained to starboard and they
followed the director, for what reason I don't know, maybe
the officer in the turret might have said to the trainer
something and they went around like that. I don't know.
I couldn't say unless I was in that turret.

Q. Normally if the director ordered guns to be trained
on an object both A and B turrets would train on that
object?

A. That's right. The same, yeah, the same - the order
would come to the turrets, "Follow director".

Q. This looks as though some separate order has been
given to A turret?

A. It may be, I don't know. Yeah, it could have been
the officer of the turret. See, I couldn't really make a
statement unless I was in that turret and heard what went
on.

LEUT VESPER

Q. You left the Sydney on 19 September 1941?

A. That's what I reckon, of course.

Q. Where were you when you left the ship?

A. We were at port down at HMAS Cerberus in Crib Point.

Q. As far as you're aware Sydney then travelled across
the Great Australian Bight?

A. She left that night or the next day, yes.

Q. And travelled west?

A. To Fremantle, as far as I know, yes.

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THE PRESIDENT

Q. Your certificate of service says you left on 18 September?

A. Yes, so it said, yeah.

Q. And started on Brisbane on 19 September 1941?

A. Yeah, well, that's what it says there, but I don't know, I reckon it's the 19th.

Q. Probably doesn't matter?

A. It doesn't matter really, you know.

LEUT VESPER

Q. Up until the time you left the ship, were you aware of any problem with one or more of the turrets?

A. Not to my - nothing wrong with the turrets as far as I know.

Q. The final photograph I wanted you to look at, Mr Lavender, is the one of the 4 inch guns?

A. Yes, yes.

Q. Firstly, can I ask you is that a picture taken of you and your colleagues firing or managing at least the 4 inch guns during the action with the Bartolomeo Colleoni?

A. It was - well it says here, but I don't - we wouldn't be firing at the Colleoni.

Q. I see that?

A. We may have been closed up, but maybe that was aircraft coming at a distance, I don't know, what that actually - we were doing.

Q. Just looking for a moment at the uniforms being worn by the personnel everyone there appears to be in white uniforms?

A. Creamy kind of a - yeah.

Q. Before we were discussing the fact that the fellows on the 4 inch guns would normally at sea be wearing blue overalls. Can you explain why in that photograph the personnel are wearing white?

A. Because in the Colleoni action we knew we were going to go into action an hour or so beforehand. We went to

1 breakfast early and the order was to clean into number
2 5's, that was this kind of rig, on account of there really
3 was - in case you spill a bit of blood, won't die out of
4 your blue overalls, your blue uniform, wouldn't get any of
5 the blood, so that's why everybody - we never did it again
6 that I know of. When we met the Italian grand fleet and
7 had a bit of an argument with them one day, we weren't in
8 that gear.

9
10 THE PRESIDENT: That's what you refer to in paragraph 10
11 of your statement, I think.

12
13 LEUT VESPER: I tender that.

14
15 THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 7E.

16
17 EXHIBIT #7E PHOTOGRAPH OF GORDON CLAIR LAVENDER AND CREW
18 MANNING 4 INCH GUNS ON HMAS SYDNEY II

19
20 LEUT VESPER: Is that a convenient time to adjourn,
21 Mr President?

22
23 THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I'll just take a short break.

24
25 SHORT ADJOURNMENT

26
27 THE PRESIDENT: Yes, Lieutenant Vesper.

28
29 LEUT VESPER: Thank you, sir.

30
31 Q. Mr Lavender, in your statutory declaration, you talk
32 about your recollection of the time Sydney was serving in
33 the Seychelles and in particular you talk about an
34 incident where Sydney passed a small tanker. In fact, you
35 say, you recall you thought you could have hit it with a
36 potato. On that occasion did you have any idea, or as you
37 sit here now, do you have any idea whether Sydney was at
38 action stations or not?

39 A. I'm not sure. I wouldn't swear on it, but we were
40 closed up on the anti-aircraft. That's why I was up
41 there. I'd say we could have been at action stations,
42 maybe it could, but I'm not dead sure. But I think we
43 could have been, I don't know.

44
45 Q. Do you know whether or not the ship had been
46 identified or not by Sydney's command team?

47 A. Well, I wouldn't know. You'd have to be on the

1 bridge to be there to see what went on. The yeoman of
2 signals they might have got the information they wanted
3 from the ship, I don't know, but we passed it that close.
4 Now, if she'd have had underwater torpedo tubes we were
5 goners, yeah.

6
7 Q. How close was the other ship, can you estimate?

8 A. Well, it was close enough, I reckon I could have
9 thrown a potato and hit it. That's my judgment. I reckon
10 it was pretty close because we was a bit, you know, it was
11 close, really close, you know.

12
13 Q. Other than that incident can you recall any other
14 approaches towards individual merchant ships by HMAS
15 Sydney?

16 A. No, never. Only going up the coast, but we were
17 escorting the ship, we just went away from them, come back
18 and made out an attack on it, put the search lights on it,
19 but that was --

20
21 Q. Was that for an exercise?

22 A. Yeah, just a friendly.

23
24 Q. Just finally, I just want to ask you a few questions
25 about the Walrus aircraft. When you were serving in
26 Sydney and the ship went to action stations was the
27 aircraft flown off or was it --

28 A. No, stayed on the ship, it was on the ship. To
29 launch it at sea and to pick it up again you'd want
30 reasonably calm weather. If it was really bad weather,
31 you know, well may be, because to pick it up the Sydney
32 had to do a half circle like that and calm the water for
33 it to land in and use the big crane to pick the aircraft
34 out of the water, so if it was a real rough sea you
35 wouldn't attempting to do it, I don't think. And usually
36 you didn't fly an aircraft just to have a look at a ship,
37 well, not in my time there. We put aircraft ashore in
38 Suda Bay for 6 weeks in Crete. We never had an aircraft
39 on the Sydney. She stayed there for 6 weeks doing
40 something there, around there, and we was without an
41 aircraft, so --

42
43 LEUT VESPER: Thank you, Mr Lavender, they are all the
44 questions I have, Mr President.

45
46 THE PRESIDENT: Yes, thank you, Mr Lavender. It's been
47 very helpful.

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THE WITNESS: Thanks, I hope it did something.

THE PRESIDENT: Great assistance to the Inquiry. Thank you very much for coming down.

<THE WITNESS WITHDREW

THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY WAS ADJOURNED TO WEDNESDAY,
25 JUNE 2008, AT 930