

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO THE LOSS OF HMAS SYDNEY II

Before The Hon TRH Cole AO RFD QC

Held at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Victoria, and
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Victoria, and
The Navy and Military Club,
Melbourne, Victoria

Counsel Assisting: LEUT M Vesper RANR

On Wednesday, 25 June 2008
(Day 4)

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

THE PRESIDENT: I've come to the home of Mr Richard Radcliffe [REDACTED] in Victoria to take his evidence.

Mr Radcliffe is 88 years of age. Mr Radcliffe, thank you for seeing me today.

<RICHARD VINCENT RADCLIFFE, sworn

THE WITNESS: The only thing is my memory is not one hundred per cent.

THE PRESIDENT: I understand that.

<EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER

LEUT VESPER

Q. Mr Radcliffe, can you tell this Commission of Inquiry your full name?

A. Richard Vincent Radcliffe.

Q. You live at [REDACTED]

A. [REDACTED] and born on [REDACTED]

Q. You have prepared a statutory declaration for the Commission of Inquiry. Is that so?

A. That's correct.

Q. You declared that statutory declaration on 10 June 2008. Is that so?

A. That's correct.

LEUT VESPER: I tender that.

THE PRESIDENT: That will be exhibit 8.

EXHIBIT #8 STATUTORY DECLARATION OF RICHARD VINCENT RADCLIFFE DECLARED 10/06/08

LEUT VESPER: If I can have access to that, Mr President?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

LEUT VESPER

Q. Mr Radcliffe, with the President's leave, I'm just going to ask you a few

- 1 more questions. Firstly it's correct, isn't it, that you served in HMAS Sydney
2 from 15 October 1938 until 27 February 1941. Is that so?
3 A. That's correct.
4
5 Q. You served in Sydney as a torpedoman. Is that so?
6 A. That's right, yes.
7
8 Q. For most of your time in Sydney your action stations position was as a
9 member of one of the torpedo teams. Is that so?
10 A. Yes, that's right.
11
12 Q. I just want to ask you some questions about the torpedo mounts on
13 Sydney. When Sydney was piped to action stations either for exercises or as
14 part of an operational need, I take it that the torpedomen would form up at their
15 respective torpedo tubes. Is that what happened?
16 A. That's correct, yes.
17
18 Q. What was done in terms of the torpedo mounts; were they trained
19 outboard or were they kept still fore and aft?
20 A. I assume at the moment that it happened they were only at cruising
21 stations, not action stations, because usually they don't go to action stations
22 when they confront a merchant ship.
23
24 Q. Mr Radcliffe, I'm not asking you about what you think might have
25 happened after you left the ship. I'm just asking you some general questions
26 about what happened when you were in the ship. As I asked, when the ship
27 went to action stations and the torpedomen went to the torpedo mounts --
28 A. They trained them outboard.
29
30 Q. There were pins on the aft end of each torpedo mount. Is that the case,
31 the safety pins?
32 A. There's a - one at 90 degrees holding it outboard. There was one at
33 180 degrees holding it inboard.
34
35 Q. In your statutory declaration at paragraph 11 you talk about the different
36 crew who were managing the torpedo tubes and you mentioned that there was
37 a leading torpedo operator who would be formed up behind the tubes who
38 controlled the releasing of safety pins which were fitted to the end of each tube.
39 You remember that?
40 A. Yes, I remember that.
41
42 Q. The safety pins, were they in each of the four tubes?
43 A. The safety pins were in the back of the compression chamber from the
44 charge and it had to be withdrawn before the pin could go on to the back of the
45 charge to build up the pressure in that pressure tank to get behind the torpedo
46 and expel it out of the tube.
47

1 Q. Mr Radcliffe, I just want you to keep thinking about those safety pins?

2 A. Yes.

3

4 Q. When the torpedomen would form up at action stations, were the pins
5 always automatically removed?

6 A. No, that was the idea of the pins, that when the larger guns were fired
7 the compression fired the pin in the chamber and it nearly set off the torpedoes.
8 We took the shell out and there was a mark on the back of the cap in the fitting
9 where the pin had come through and had touched, so they had to say put the
10 pins in while the charges were up top, but when they fired them and took the
11 torpedoes on to the - out, like that, they were ready to take the pins out when
12 they were told.

13

14 Q. When would the pins be taken out?

15 A. Just before they were about to fire the torpedoes.

16

17 THE PRESIDENT

18

19 Q. The pins were there as a safety device to stop the torpedoes being
20 launched when the main guns were fired?

21 A. That's right.

22

23 Q. If they were going to launch the torpedoes you'd get an order to remove
24 the pins, would you?

25 A. Yes, the canopy in the centre of the torpedo tubes was - an operator in
26 there with his hearing aid so he was in direct contact from the bridge. He'd be
27 told and he'd pass the order on to the people outside. And they would remove
28 the pins when the, but they were all on tenterhooks all the time there in the
29 room, would have taken a second or so to remove the pins.

30

31 Q. Could the torpedo operators see out across the water where their
32 torpedoes were pointing?

33 A. The chap in the turret can. He can see and he works a disk of where the
34 torpedoes are going to go and what's got to be set on the torpedoes and he
35 gets the settings and everything from the bridge. And he sets the depth of
36 travel. It was quite a complicated affair because they could zigzag the
37 torpedoes, you could put them on a fan or put them straight ahead and they set
38 it at one depth and one at another depth. And I don't know at that time what the
39 Sydney's were, if they had the more modern ones, they had also had a
40 magnetic firing system, so that if they went under the vessel and missed the
41 vessel the automatic - magnetic field of the ship, it only needed 2 gauss to
42 make the switch that fired the torpedo underneath the ship. We had the
43 modern ones on the destroyers later, but I don't know. 1941 we came home
44 and I had to let all the high pressure air out of the torpedoes and everything,
45 defuse them and everything else because they were going into dry dock and
46 they didn't have the ammunition in dry dock, so when I left then and the
47 torpedoes that were returned to their ship, I don't know whether they were more

1 modern or still the old type.

2

3 LEUT VESPER

4

5 Q. Mr Radcliffe, when you served in Sydney can you recall whether Sydney
6 ever fired any or all of its torpedoes?

7 A. Yes. We did torpedo practice. Instead of having the 750 pound of TNT
8 sitting on the front of, there was a dummy head was in place and it had - was
9 loaded with a charge of high pressure air and set at depth and it was fired at
10 that depth. And when it ran out of steam it came to the surface as a buoy and
11 the pressure in there blew all of the water out of the dummy head and it floated
12 up and it was there - a hook on the top and the blokes used to row along side
13 and just hook in and tow it back to the ship.

14

15 Q. When an order was received by the torpedomen under the canopy in the
16 middle of the mount to fire the torpedoes, could you just tell the Commissioner,
17 what would happen once you got that order; what was the procedure to fire the
18 torpedoes and how long would it take between receiving the order and firing the
19 torpedoes?

20 A. How long, did you say, if he says, "Remove the pins", that's all he had to
21 say, they're gone.

22

23 Q. Then the fellow under the canopy he would release --

24 A. He knows then that he can fire those torpedoes and he makes sure that
25 those pins are out before he presses the button.

26

27 Q. If the rating who was standing by to remove the pins, if he was wounded
28 or otherwise unavailable could other torpedomen step in to remove the pins?

29 A. I didn't get that.

30

31 Q. You mentioned that there was a leading torpedo operator who would be
32 standing by to remove the pins?

33 A. The leading operator, torpedo operator, is standing on the rear and he's
34 got two ordinary seamen torpedomen on each side of the tubes. They each
35 remove a pin and he removes the two in the middle.

36

37 Q. If one of the hands was wounded or unavailable other people could step
38 in to remove the pins. Is that right?

39 A. If there's?

40

41 THE PRESIDENT

42

43 Q. All the torpedomen who were there were all trained to remove the pins if
44 need be?

45 A. Yes, yes, there wasn't much training. It was only a matter of pulling it
46 out.

47

1 LEUT VESPER

2

3 Q. I might just ask you then some questions about one of the other jobs you
4 had on board the ship when you first joined you were the life buoy sentry. Is
5 that so?

6 A. Life buoy sentry as a job was up on the back of X turret and you were
7 out there in the open air when the guns were blasting and --

8

9 Q. I just want to ask you some other questions about safety and safety
10 training on the ship. Can you remember whether every sailor had a leaving
11 ship station or a muster point for when --

12 A. Yes, everybody had their particular place when the alarm bell went or
13 when action stations sounded they knew exactly where they had to go.

14

15 Q. That was for action stations?

16 A. Yes, and at action stations when they got to their action stations all
17 watertight doors would be closed, everything.

18

19 Q. Was every sailor also given a place to go to if the ship was to be
20 abandoned, that is were you all told that if we ever have to abandon ship you
21 will muster at a Carley float or a life boat; was that something you recall?

22 A. No.

23

24 THE PRESIDENT

25

26 Q. Was there any practise of abandoning ship?

27 A. Yes, there was a lot of practises of abandoning ship. It was one of the
28 biggest things, the practise abandon ship and then they'd send a whaler away,
29 and instead of using the capstans to bring it back up again they would long
30 loads and everything, clear over everybody up down - running up and down and
31 just rattle off using the manpower to pull the boat back up into position.

32

33 Q. When you practised abandon ship, what did all the crew have to do?

34 A. Well, I never ever thought about it. I never - there was no thought of
35 abandoning ship. Get off as quick as possible, I mean, because no matter what
36 I've seen in the Navy the only time they abandon ship is when it was impossible
37 to do anything else. I mean - we were all there to fight to the finish. I've never
38 done an abandon ship with the Navy.

39

40 Q. You've never had a practise abandon ship?

41 A. No practise abandoning the ship, just lowering and --

42

43 Q. Just practising lowering the life rafts, life crafts?

44 A. Life boats, yes.

45

46 LEUT VESPER: Mr Radcliffe, when you would practise abandoning ship --

47

1 THE PRESIDENT: No.

2

3 LEUT VESPER: I must have misunderstood you.

4

5 THE PRESIDENT

6

7 Q. My understanding is they did not practise abandoning ship, but they
8 practised various drills such as lower life rafts. Is that right?

9 A. Everybody when they went to action stations they had their own Mae
10 West. This was possibly the reason why they don't practise, because they've
11 got that to keep them afloat and the only thing we were taught as far as
12 abandon ship is we used to sleep in hammocks. Now, a hammock had to be
13 lashed in a certain way and stowed in bins, so that when the - if the ship did go
14 down they would come out and float and you'd find a hammock and you would
15 be able to keep afloat for about 45 hours. That was one of the original things
16 we learnt when we went into the seamanship training early. Everybody just
17 took it into sort of natural thing that you'd never have to abandon ship.

18

19 LEUT VESPER

20

21 Q. The next topic I was interested in, Mr Radcliffe, was the clothing worn by
22 the torpedomen when you were at cruising stations, or indeed action stations,
23 when you served on the Sydney. Normally what would the sailors be wearing
24 in the torpedo parties when they were at cruising stations and I'm talking about
25 when Sydney was serving in the Mediterranean, for instance?

26 A. In the Mediterranean, there was no cruising stations. You were mostly at
27 action stations because you'd been with the fleet. If you weren't with the fleet
28 you'd be with another two or three ships as far as - we used to escort about
29 three or four destroyers or sometimes it would be three cruisers with - one night
30 we went three cruisers up into the Adriatic Sea and sunk convoys and that
31 there and we just had to - the thing they did they'd train all the cables along the
32 upper deck so that if they had to tow another ship out they could tow fore or
33 they could tow aft then that was standard practice.

34

35 Q. What were the torpedomen wearing normally throughout those days in
36 the Mediterranean, can you recall?

37 A. They would be wearing anti-flash gear to start with, that's the hood and
38 the gloves, probably wearing the Mae West, canvas uniform and boots or
39 shoes.

40

41 Q. Those canvas uniforms that you recall were they white uniforms or blue
42 or --

43 A. Well, it all depends what season in the year it was and what part of the
44 tropics that you're in or which colour they were.

45

46 Q. In summer, what were the fellows wearing in the torpedo parties, can
47 you recall, in the summer months?

- 1 A. Well, mostly the torpedo party would be wearing overalls, blue overalls.
2
- 3 Q. Can you recall whether the other upper deckmen, for example, the
4 people who were manning the 4 inch guns, which would have been above you,
5 can you recall what they were wearing in the summer months when they were
6 on the upper decks. Similar clothing to the torpedomen for instance?
7 A. In the summer months it would be what they call a number 5 canvas,
8 white canvas uniform, top and canvas shirt.
9
- 10 Q. Would they sometimes be wearing --
11 A. No blue and white collar. It would be just a plain white collar.
12
- 13 Q. Do you recall that they might also be wearing blue overalls from time to
14 time?
15 A. From time to time. It all depends, people like the painter and painter's
16 mate they would be wearing overalls, because as you see they paint - too hard
17 to get off your uniform. All the stokers would be wearing overalls and
18 sometimes the stokers that were off-watch were required to carry ammunition,
19 so they'd be wearing overalls while they're carrying ammunition from --
20
- 21 Q. Would that be 4 inch ammunition?
22 A. 4 inch ammunition, yes.
23
- 24 Q. Those stokers would be in blue overalls?
25 A. Yes. The people on the, that were inside the ship at the fire control
26 tables, they would probably be the stores people and people wearing uniforms,
27 cooks --
28
- 29 Q. Stewards?
30 A. And stewards and they would be working - they'd have their - probably
31 their Navy blue --
32
- 33 Q. Uniform?
34 A. --jackets, uniforms.
35
- 36 Q. They were members of the Miscellaneous Branch. Is that right?
37 A. That's right, yeah.
38
- 39 Q. They would have secondary jobs such as you say working in the fire
40 control rooms and other duties in the ship. Is that so?
41 A. Yes, and there's - when the ship went to action stations certain groups
42 that were formed up into fire control repair control units and they could wear
43 overalls because they had all things that they were using - well, the tools to
44 shore up things if anything happened at all like that, you know.
45
- 46 Q. There would be parties of men throughout the ship who were standing by
47 for damage control?

1 A. Yes, that was action station, they had damage control people right
2 throughout the ship.

3

4 Q. Was there wood and other objects and tools available to do shoring up if
5 required at various places around the ship?

6 A. Yes, yes, because in my action station when I was on the telephone
7 exchange I would get a call through the telephone exchange to other groups all
8 the time with what was happening and what they wanted, if they wanted
9 something else it would be passed down like that. The only direct phones to
10 the bridge were from particular places, the guns, the quarterdeck, torpedoes
11 and the fire control and the fire control in the upper tower. The majority of the
12 people that wanted to contact somebody else through the ship would go
13 through the telephone exchange. It was a busy time.

14

15 Q. Just with damage control parties, were there also parties that were
16 standing by to fight fires?

17 A. Yes, they were already controlled - they already had the damage control
18 party - they had their fire extinguishers and everything at that particular spot,
19 but they were placed throughout the ship.

20

21 Q. Can you recall exercising or exercises that involve fire fighting, running
22 out of hoses, connecting of canvas hoses. Is that something that --

23 A. They used to do that at least once a week, hoses would get run out
24 along the upper deck and rerolled and everything like that and that's a --

25

26 THE PRESIDENT

27

28 Q. Did you regularly go to action stations for practice first thing in the
29 morning?

30 A. Yes, yeah.

31

32 Q. Then in the evening?

33 A. In the morning and the evening, yes, that was - doesn't matter whether
34 you'd been - had the middle watch or anything at night time you still had to go to
35 action dawn service, action stations or evening action stations and you were
36 there for - either until it got dark or until it got light. You weren't going to be
37 caught coming light and all of a sudden find somebody that was --

38

39 LEUT VESPER

40

41 Q. Mr Radcliffe, when the ship went to action stations would men also form
42 up at the 4 inch guns and the machine guns as far as you could tell. In other
43 words, if the

44

45

46 ship went to action stations would all guns and torpedoes be manned?

47 A. Yes, yes.

1
2 THE PRESIDENT
3
4 Q. 6 inch guns?
5 A. Every gun and every torpedo would be manned at action stations.
6
7 Q. I see you were mentioned in dispatches --
8 A. Yes.
9
10 Q. -- in 1946. What was that for?
11 A. I don't know.
12
13 Q. General good service, perhaps?
14 A. Undetected crimes.
15
16 LEUT VESPER: That is a good time, Mr President.
17
18 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
19
20 THE PRESIDENT: Is there anything further you want from this witness?
21
22 LEUT VESPER: I have no further questions, Mr President.
23
24 THE PRESIDENT: All right, thank you, Mr Radcliffe, we have your evidence,
25 thank you and it's been very helpful to me and I'd like to thank you for agreeing
26 to see us and for all your assistance to the Commission. Thank you very
27 much?
28
29 THE WITNESS Thank you very much.
30
31 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW
32
33 SHORT ADJOURNMENT
34
35 THE PRESIDENT: I've come to the home of Mr Allen Guthrie in [REDACTED]
36 Victoria to take his evidence.
37
38 He is currently 88 years of age. Thank you very much for agreeing to
39 see us, Mr Guthrie.
40
41 <ALLEN CHARLES GUTHRIE, sworn
42
43 <EXAMINATION BY LEUT VESPER
44
45 LEUT VESPER
46
47 Q. Sir, can you tell us your full name?