

Witness Statement

Neil, Andrew Kenneth.

21 March 2011

C/- Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, GPO Box 1425, Brisbane, QLD, 4001.

I, Andrew Kenneth Neil state: I am a [REDACTED] year male who is employed as a Firefighter by the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) in Brisbane Region. I have been employed in the QFRS for 6 years and I am currently stationed at Petrie Fire and Rescue Station. During this period, I have attended numerous emergency incidents. I am trained to Level 2 in Technical Rescue which includes Swiftwater Rescue. Being Level 2 enables me to enter the water to perform rescues.

On 10 January 2011 I was rostered at Special Operations Unit, Cannon Hill from 0800hours to 1800hours. I was rostered on with Station Officer Brad Mills and we were working on the technical rescue truck, call sign 850L. At 1432hours we responded to an incident at Withcott, Lockyer Valley. Whilst on route to this incident at approximately 1510hours we heard communication on the radio concerning a report of a car with occupants washed off the Lockyer Creek Bridge, Hellidon into extremely fast flowing water. Station Officer Mills requested further details on the radio and was told that three people were in the vehicle when washed off the bridge and was now floating downstream. Station Officer Mills then decided that we would proceed to this incident and advised Firecom, South East. We arrived at this incident at approximately 1531hours and spoke to the Officer in Charge. When I arrived I saw the bridge was covered by several metres of fast flowing water, carrying a lot of debris with it. I realised that there was no way it could be entered as it was far too dangerous. Station Officer Mills then pointed out the car with the occupants on the roof. I could see the occupants; the car was approximately 150metres away from where I was standing. The car was not floating very fast and was not in the main flow but had floated across to an area with less flow. Station Officer Mills and I then started to work out a plan but it was evident that we could not approach the vehicle from this side of the river. Station Officer Mills suggested that we contact the channel 7 helicopter to place us on the other side of the river allowing us to have some chance of accessing the vehicle. Station Officer Mills then contacted the helicopter by radio as there was already a firefighter in the helicopter and organised them to pick up Station Officer Mills and myself.

We commenced getting in swiftwater suits and discussing a plan. We took our ropes and life jackets in readiness to be dropped from the helicopter. At 1542hours Station Mills and I boarded the channel 7 helicopter and proceeded to the last known location of the vehicle, as the vehicle had now disappeared. Once we were in the air we could no longer see the occupants and began searching. Gradually we flew downstream for a couple of

kilometres. We came across a bridge, full of debris, which was acting as a stopper and realised that they would not have been able to pass this and then we began to backtrack a lower search up river again. At that point the pilot notified us that he was beginning to get low on fuel. This is when I noticed an arm waving from the trees in the middle of the river. We then circled the area to try and work out how we could best access the woman. The woman was situated approximately 200metres from the eastern bank and a 100metres from the west bank. The area was surrounded by fast flowing water littered with an enormous amount of debris, such as refrigerators, tyres, trees and timber. We were dropped onto an island downstream. The channel 7 helicopter then left to refuel.

We tried to make verbal contact with the woman however this was difficult due to the roaring of the fast moving water. We then developed a plan. We decided that if the woman let go of where she was it was possible that she may float passed Station Officer Mills on the island enabling him to reach her with a throw bag. If she didn't come close enough to the island, I could possible access her by swimming out to a clump of trees approximately 10metres from the island where Station Officer Mills was situated. I swam in the water which was flowing extremely fast. There was still an enormous amount of debris to negotiate to get to the clump of trees. When I swam out I was not a hundred percent sure that I would make the clump of trees. Fortunately I reach the trees; this widened the rescue range to catch the woman. We ascertained with her that she was fine and the water by this time was slowly starting to recede. After a discussion with Station Officer Mills we decided that it may be a better option to access the woman from the island after she had called out that she was confident that she could hang on. I then swam back towards the island and I was washed further down stream amongst the debris. Finally I reached the island downstream where Station Officer Mills was located. We then made our way up to the closest point on the island and swam across stream to a branch. The current was very strong whilst swimming across the stream and difficult to reach the branch. However we both made it and then swam upstream through a little back eddy to finally reach the woman. We removed her from the tree and placed her on high ground adjacent to the tree branches which enabled us to check her condition. We put her in a life jacket to keep her warm and started to talk to her about her husband and child, including the last time she saw them and what where they wearing. We waited in this area for approximately 45minutes until helitac 220 arrived to pick us up. By this time the water had receded and the helitac was able to land adjacent to us on higher ground. We were then transported back to the Lockyer Creek Bridge on the Warrego Highway and left the woman with Queensland Police Service. The helitac resumed searching and a short time later returned with the woman's child. We then got back into the helitac at approximately 1752hours and continued to search downstream for the woman's husband. We were unable to locate the woman's husband.

After the search we proceeded to Toowoomba to enable the helitac to refuel. We were then notified of a house floating down the river with the residents on the roof. We proceeded directly to the latitude/longitude that was provided

to us. We came across the house and the pilot told us that they needed to winch the residents off the house however this was not possible whilst we were aboard. We were dropped off near the Grantham School to enable the helitac to return for the residents.

We then spoke to a number of people in Grantham and were informed of members of the public that were missing. After a quick perusal of the general area, we could see them. It was getting dark and difficult to reach them as the water was probably still two metres deep and travelling fast with a lot of debris. As night fell we could hear the people and some had torches that we could pick their location from. One of the locals accompanied us to the water line to point out some of the streets to provide us with a rough outline of where the streets were located under the water. This person was also able to give us a rough idea of the number of people stranded. At about 2030 hours, the water was dropping and we decided to enter the water to rescue people from Railway and William Streets and Anzac Avenue. Although the water had dropped it was still chest high and still flowing rapidly with debris including a big piece of irrigation pipe which we were able to use to stabilise ourselves. Power lines were also down and in the water and we were unsure if they were live or not. At this point we were operating in the dark with headlamps. We then went to the houses and escorted 15 people from separate houses. We all linked arms and proceeded to a safe area identified by the locals that we were rescuing. We continued to operate that night until approximately 0230 hours on 11 January 2011.

Station Officer Mills borrowed a mobile phone of a member of the public to notify Firecom South East of our location.



Signature
Name/ Rank



Witness Signature *Sept.*
Name/Rank

<http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/lifesaver-andrew-neil-goes-with-the-flow-in-rescuing-people-from-floods/story-fn7knuy7-1225990178207>

<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2011/s3117602.htm>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2011/01/20/3117590.htm>