

Statement of Witness

Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

<i>Name of Witness</i>	Philip Gregory O'Driscoll
<i>Date of Birth</i>	[REDACTED]
<i>Address and contact details</i>	O'DRISCOLL Aviation [REDACTED] Howard Springs NT 0835 Business email - [REDACTED]
<i>Occupation</i>	Helicopter Pilot
<i>Officer taking statement</i>	Detective Senior Sergeant Mark Reid
<i>Date taken</i>	28 April 2011

Philip Gregory O'Driscoll states:

1. I am a single man, [REDACTED] years of age and I currently own and operate an aviation business which conducts helicopter utility work which is based out of Darwin Northern Territory. My primary role is as a pilot of a helicopter which is used for heavy lifting of equipment and property in the mining industry, and fire suppression. My qualifications are 20 yrs of flying, licences in both fixed wing and helicopter aircraft that allow me to operate as PIC (pilot in command) I operate a Bell 205/UH1H which is capable of transporting 1.5 tonnes in pay load. While working on the floods, I had one crew member Ryan who was responsible for loading of freight and people, and to assist the general operation of the aircraft.
2. I am not limited to working in the Northern Territory and had been working in the Mackay area since December 2010 assisting SkyAg with the distribution of fertiliser. I had been down working with SkyAg in Queensland for about three weeks when we were called out to assist in the floods at Emerald and Rockhampton around 3 or 4 January 2011.
3. As I was contracting for SkyAg at that time in January 2011, SkyAg were then contacted to assist with the floods response by *Independent Aviation* who are the company the Queensland Government use to locate suitable aircraft and helicopters

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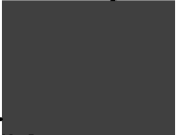
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for Government contracting tasks. *Independent Aviation* is used by Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) to obtain suitable aircraft resources for emergency situations.

4. I was tasked in the Rockhampton area for about a week before we were requested to travel to Brisbane to assist with the floods in South East Queensland. I was staged at the Heritage Centre waiting to be tasked for rescue work. The ADF completed a majority of the work whilst we were being occasionally tasked by the Rockhampton Branch of Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) a very competent & professional team to transfer food supplies or people. Whilst the QFRS were tasking us, it allowed us to have direct contact with an agency and we were there available to be put to use, when reqd. This made tasking easier and improved co-ordination.
5. After leaving for South East Queensland Independent Aviation tasked us directly by the mobile telephone in response to requests from EMQ. We did not talk directly to any of the Emergency Agencies after leaving Rockhampton which made it really hard to know what was going on or keeping a flow or direction of the work being carried out. This was very frustrating and we felt that we were at times lost in the system. Every thing that we did came to us third or fourth hand over the mobile telephone. There was confusion with the co-ordination in the tasking of the aircraft.
6. I left Rockhampton on Tuesday 11 January 2011 and flew straight to Brisbane. The weather was foul, but we continued, doing transport of supplies to residents at both Gympie and Cherbourg over the next day, and then onto Toowoomba and Grantham. Our main role was shifting equipment, food and also residents out of water to higher ground.
7. I was the first daylight helicopter into Ipswich on 12 January 2011. We delivered sandbags to the SES at Ipswich as it prepared to flood, and then assisted with the delivery of food and equipment to an evacuation centre. To walk into the evacuation centre with a box of food being confronted with so many displaced people, some calm, some shocked, some confused. I was confronted by an agitated man wanting sand bags to save his home, but we had none, having just delivered a tonne of them to

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the SES at Ipswich which were just across the expanse of water from where this man was. I tried to explain to him the enormity of the situation and how stretched the hard working people at the SES and emergency services were, he was obviously in shock as he seemed confused as it was hard to get him to understand what I was trying to explain. I felt quite sorry for their situation. As this was happening a medical emergency developed and we evacuated a woman to the Ipswich hospital. The distress and panic in her eyes, and along with the gentleman I mentioned earlier, certainly set the scene for the day that continued.

8. I found it very hard to operate without being able to call or receive information directly to/from EMQ to get direct instructions or to be able to call to adapt and evolve as the situation develops in the field. This would have allowed the better use of the resources.

9. On 12 January 2011 I heard a policeman calling for the help over the radio, in regard to a medical emergency, he was calling for any helicopter. The security person assigned to the staging area had a radio receiver and I could hear the police officer continually calling for assistance, but we couldn't respond. The policeman called over that radio off and on for ages, we kept calling on the mobile telephone to *Independent Aviation* for approval to depart, but were told to sit tight and await tasking. It appeared we were lost in the confusion of the situation. We continued to sit tight and five hours went past without tasking, we kept checking through our contact every 30 - 60 mins. We had no direct telephone numbers to call or persons to speak to, and it appeared that there was then a situation where there seemed to be a lack of coordination / communication between the agencies. This is what I found the most frustrating part of that day. We had a helicopter and could have assisted a number of people on the day, but no one at our staging area seemed to know what was going on.

10. We were not approved to move/fly without a dispatch order from Independent Aviation, which is approved by EMQ. On that same day whilst waiting for despatch, we had contact with the SERT Team QPS who had approached us and asked for us to fly them to the Lockyer Valley. I was told the flight had been approved by the Police

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Commissioner, but with confusion or co-ordination issues and their equipment loaded up, their survey flight did not eventuate.

11. Other rescue helicopters kept coming into the Ipswich staging area and saying that they were flat out and they were wondering why we had not been tasked as they could use the help out there. We sat for 5 or so hours through the middle of this emergency. During this time calls for body bags were growing and the continuing call over the radio from the police officer, the SERT team on the ground, the conversations with the passing rescue pilots and the events early that morning at the evacuation centre and the medical emergency, I found this situation, emotional & demoralising. We had the people and the a/c sitting there in the middle of a disaster doing nothing and feeling very helpless.

12. The following day, 13 January 2011, my aircraft was used to make a large amount of food deliveries. It felt good to be actively helping the people with delivery of resources.

13. I must say that while flying on the floods that emotions varied so much as each day passed and with the different tasks, but there were the great moments while flying in and handing out supplies to residents of the valley, that short moment handing out a box of food and catching a glimpse from their face, a nod, smile and a small thanks made it all worth it and help over ride the mountains of frustration with the management of the incident. I know all the management teams from EMQ, Fire and rescue & Emergency services ministers' office etc, worked very hard and professional throughout this disaster, but I believe they found the situation overwhelming.

14. I wanted to say as it was never really highlighted by any of the news agencies that for the early few days of the emergency that civilian helicopters did the great work and carried nearly all of the load of the situation. There were many civilian flight crews doing a large range of tasks throughout this whole disaster, not just the emergency aspect, but aviation companies reconnecting families, moving businesses still trying to operate that I wanted to acknowledge for their professionalism and efficiency. I

think these people need us all to be thankful to them. I personally wish to congratulate them for the work they performed.

On a separate issue

15. The use of the ADF is also one of my major issues. I believe it was the correct decision to bring in the military, but not to push aside civilian aircraft. The person that was put in charge of the flood operation was a military officer, hence maybe the reason he used military resources. There needed to be a combination of military resources and civilian resources because of the scale of the devastation and the fact that the civilian aircraft were more than capable to handle the requirement of the tasks presented. I am a new business, starting out on my own, I rely on my business to make a living, we have these a/c and build our business to respond to disasters, ie fires, floods & cyclones. Once the ADF helicopters were introduced, civilian helicopters were excluded. This occurred on about day 3 of the flood event.

16. It was the same situation in Rockhampton and Emerald. This decision directly affected my business financially. There were many occasions when we could & should have been used & we were being kept on the ground, being paid minimums on a contract whether we flew or not, but the ADF continued on the task whilst we were parked. I am sorry but I am a believer that all the civilian resources should have continued to be used first with the military being used to fill the gaps of capability. The problem that I foresee is that if ADF resources continually replace civilian resources, private businesses will not survive for future events. An example I use is that the military didn't send in builders and carpenters to rebuild houses damaged by the floods as that would be taking civilian work away from the people, taking away jobs and livelihoods, the same extends to our aviation businesses.

17. The multitude of civilian helicopters that were competently doing the job prior to that point were just parked, with the military taking control, not sharing or working together as it should have happened.

18. We remained parked in the staging area for another 4 days before returning to base.

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19. My recommendations to improve for the future events are:

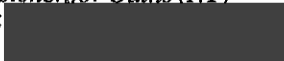
- To give direct points of contact to EMQ to minimise confusion and increase efficiency of these resources
- To work out a better plan to co-ordinate and integrate civilian and military a/c
- Use available civilian a/c, this utilisation will help build better civilian resources right around the country, giving Australians the satisfaction in the knowledge that we are well resourced to respond for any emergency that may occur nationwide.

P O'DRISCOLL



5/5/11



Michelle Preca
Police Auxiliary 4243
Northern Territory Police
Commissioner for Oaths (NT)
Ph: 

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