

CHRIS AIR – Capt RM

Before we start this facility I would like to say a few words on behalf of every member of my team. Yesterday we were reunited with our families after a 14 day ordeal that none of us will forget. On arrival at London Heathrow we were given the news that 4 UK servicemen and a civilian interpreter had been killed in Iraq. We would like to pass on our thoughts and condolences to the families of those who died serving their country.

We would also like to as a group to thank the staff of the British Embassy in Tehran and the Foreign Office and Ministry of defence for all their work in securing our release. We understand a great deal of effort has been going on behind the scenes to enable us to be returned to the UK and for that we are very grateful.

We would also like to thank British Airways and London Heathrow for making our return so comfortable, quick and easy.

Lastly I would like to thank the very many members of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines who have been working so hard over the last 2 weeks supporting our families and friends and for arranging our return to here.

FELIX CARMEN – Lt RN

On Friday 23 March I along with 14 of my colleagues were part of a routine boarding patrol. We deployed from HMS Cornwall in 2 x

Rigid Inflatable Boats and patrolled into an area south of the Shatt Al Arab waterway. This was meant to be a routine boarding operation and followed approximately 66 similar such boarding's over the previous 4 weeks.

We approached an unidentified merchant vessel that our supporting helicopter had identified as worth investigation. We carried out a completely compliant boarding with the full cooperation of the Master and crew. The RM secured the vessel and the RN element of the boarding party then arrived and commenced a thorough search of the ship. This was in complete accordance with our UN mandate and as part of an International Coalition.

We were equipped with Xeres true navigational equipment and hand held GPS for backup. The helicopter in support provided continuous navigational confirmation and we were also linked to HMS CORNWALL who were monitoring our exact position at all times. Let me make it absolutely clear, irrespective of what has been said in the past, when we were detained by the IRG we were inside internationally recognised Iraqi territorial waters and I can clearly state we were 1.7 nautical miles from Iranian waters

CHRIS

It was during the boarding that we noticed the helicopter had returned to 'Mother', and we started calling the ship on VHF to find out why. A short while later two speed boats were spotted approaching rapidly about 400 metres away.

I ordered everyone to make their weapons ready and ordered the boarding party to return to the boats. By the time all were back on board, two Iranian boats had come alongside. One officer spoke good English and I explained that we were conducting a routine operation, as allowed under a UN mandate. But when we tried to leave, they prevented us by blocking us in. By now it was becoming increasingly clear that they had arrived with a planned intent. Some of the Iranian sailors were becoming deliberately aggressive and unstable. They rammed our boat and trained their heavy machine guns, RPGs and weapons on us.

Another six boats were closing in on us. We realised that our efforts to reason with these people were not making any headway. Nor were we able to calm some of the individuals down. It was at this point that we realised that had we resisted there would have been a major fight, one we could not have won with consequences that would have had major strategic impact. We made a conscious decision to not engage the Iranians and do as they asked. They boarded our boats, removed our weapons and steered the boats towards the Iranian shore.

FELIX

On arrival at a small naval base, we were blindfolded, stripped of all our kit and led to a room where I declared myself as the officer in charge and was introduced to a local commander.

Two hours later we were moved to a second location and throughout the night were subjected to random interrogations. The questions were aggressive and the handling rough, but it was no worse than that.

The following morning we were flown to Tehran and transported to a prison where the atmosphere changed completely. We were blindfolded, our hands were bound and we were forced up against a wall. Throughout our ordeal we faced constant psychological pressure.

Later we were stripped and then dressed in pyjamas. The next few nights were spent in stone cells, approximately 8'x6', sleeping on piles of blankets. All of us were kept in isolation.

We were interrogated most nights, and presented with two options. If we admitted we had strayed, we would be on a plane back to the UK soon. If we didn't we faced up to seven years in prison. We all at one time or another made a conscious decision to make a controlled release of non operational information.

We were kept in isolation until the last few nights when we were allowed to gather for a few hours together, in the full glare of Iranian media.

On day 12 we were taken to a Governmental complex blindfolded and then given three piece suits to wear. We watched the President's statement live on TV, and it was only then that we realise we were to be sent home. It goes without saying that there

was a huge moment of elation. We were made to line up to meet the president, one at a time. My advice to everyone was not to mess this up now – we all wanted to get home. Afterwards – and still blindfolded – we were taken back to the hotel and for the first time met with UK representatives including the Ambassador before boarding our flight back to Heathrow.

CHRIS

In the short time we have been back we have not been able to see all that has been broadcast or written about our ordeal. We are aware that many people have questioned why we allowed ourselves to be taken in the first place and why we allowed ourselves to be shown by the Iranian authorities on television.

Let me be absolutely clear, from the outset it was very apparent that fighting back was simply not an option. Had we chosen to do so then many of us would not be standing here today. Of that I have no doubts. The Iranian Navy did not turn up lightly armed; they came with intent, heavy weapons, and very quickly surrounded us. We were equipped, armed and had rules of engagement for boarding operations within Iraqi water. We were not prepared to fight a heavily armed force who it is our impression came out deliberately into Iraqi waters to take us prisoner. Reasoning with the Iranians was our only option. We tried. We did our utmost to de-escalate the situation, but our words fell on deaf ears. They had come with a clear purpose and were never going to leave without us.

The Iranians are not our enemies. We are not at war with them. Our rules of engagement at that time stated that we could only use lethal force if we felt that we were in imminent danger of a loss of life. By the time the true intent of the Iranians had become apparent – and we could have legitimately fought back – it was too late for action. We were completely surrounded, and in addition to the loss of life, any attempted to fight back would caused a major international incident and an escalation of tension within the region. Our team had seconds to make a decision and we believe that we made the right decision. We still believe this was the right thing to do.

FELIX

Some have questioned why HMS CORNWALL did not provide greater protection for the team. HMS CORNWALL is there to guard the vital oil platforms and command the coalition forces. She is also the platform by where boarding teams can launch from and patrol out. Not only should she not have been closer to us but she physically could not have been, the water is simply too shallow. We are all immensely proud to be members of her crew and look forward to rejoining her.

I would just like to stress 3 points at this stage

When taken by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard we were well inside Iraqi territorial waters.

The detention was clearly illegal and not a pleasant experience. We as a group held out for as long as we thought appropriate. We then complied up to a point with our captors.

We remain Immensely proud of our team. Their courage and dignity throughout their illegal detention was in line with the best tradition of the service

Throughout our ordeal we have tried to remain very much a team. No one individual should be singled out but we are now very aware of the special treatment singled out to Faye Turney. Faye is a young mother and wife. She volunteered to join the Royal Navy and is very proud to continue to serve. She is a highly professional operator and we are incredibly proud to have her as part of our team.

The fact she is a women has been used as a propaganda tool by Iran. This is deeply regrettable. She is coming to terms with what has happened to her and not only Faye and her family but all of us are finding the press focus very uncomfortable and difficult and specifically request that you give all of us the space and privacy we need when we return to our homes