

Witness Name: Mike Bill

Statement No: [1]

Exhibits: [MB/01 – MB/05]

Dated: 14.11.2024

THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MIKE BILL

I, Mike Bill, c/o Maritime & Coastguard Agency ("MCA") will say as follows:

Introduction

1. I make this statement in my capacity as Divisional Commander for His Majesty's Coastguard ("HMCG") section of MCA, in response to a witness evidence request dated 14 October 2024.
2. The contents of this witness statement are based on my recollection assisted by contemporaneous documents, which I have used to refresh my memory.

My Role with HMCG

3. Prior to joining HMCG, I was a Deck Officer at Sea with a class 4 certificate of competency in sea navigation. Subsequently, I joined HMCG in 1985, initially as a Watch Officer. I have progressed through HMCG over the last 40 years in various different roles. I have undertaken a large number of training courses, internally and externally in management and Coastguard Operations. This includes multi-agency

gold command training (MAGIC), Search planning training and a numerous practical exercises.

4. Whilst I have had training in Search and Recuse ("SAR"), I cannot recall anything specific to small boats other than participation in Tabletop exercises exploring various scenarios. There would have been regular updates/briefings, as knowledge around small boats became known and technology developed. For example, I was certainly aware in November 2021 of the development in the use of WhatsApp to try and locate small boats and was aware of how assets were being deployed to incidents etc.

5. I have been in the role of Divisional Commander since February 2014, the role details of which is set out in document **MB/01 [INQ009682]**. The qualification for this role is largely experience based in a number of areas such as; response & coordination, mission conduct/incident command, emergency planning, management and SAR. The role requires around 10 or more years' experience of command and control/management of large teams at a strategic level. My day-to-day role includes representing HMCG at a number of specific meetings, management of personnel, budgeting and high-level oversight, amongst other responsibilities. I am responsible for the oversight of both Humber and Dover stations specifically.

My Involvement in the events of 23-24 November 2021

Background

6. My official hours of work would have generally been 09:00 until 17:00. However, I usually start work earlier. On 23-24 November 2021, I cannot remember the exact time I started work but I anticipate it would have been approximately 08:00.

7. My line manager at the time would have been the Assistant Chief Coastguard Name However, he would not have had any specific oversight on events at Dover during 23-24 November 2021 necessarily unless I contacted him for specific advice, which was not the case.

8. I had a number of people under my supervision (direct line management) during November 2021. I was the Strategic lead for a Coastguard Division (Division 2) which stretched from the Scottish border down the East Coast and around to Selsey in West Sussex. I would have been overseeing the work of 4 Coastal Area Commanders, a Counter Pollution and Salvage Officer and 5 Tactical Commanders ("TACOM's") based at Humber and Dover Rescue Coordination Centres. These Commanders would have supervised those below the Commander level and the team leaders would supervise levels below that.

9. As Divisional Commander I would not have been directly involved in Small Boat Incidents but I would have had an awareness of what was going on. I would have also been a point of contact, should the Tactical Commanders have required additional resource/advice, though they would not be expected to report to me on all matters.

HMCG Tracker

10. I do not have any independent recollection of updating the HMCG Tracker on 24 November 2021. However, I have had the opportunity to review the index document provided by HMCG **MB/2 [INQ007058]** which notes that I made a change to the tracker at 08:35.

11. Having reviewed **MB/03 [INQ006835]**, I was not able to identify which entry I had made at 08:35 from first appearance. Given the passage of time, it would be difficult for me to now recall what change I made to the tracker.

12. As such, I have had the opportunity to compare the earlier version of the tracker **MB/04 [INQ006834]** and can identify that the only change appears to be the entry in column "UKBF Ref" for incident Lima that notes "M958". I do not now recall making this entry but it is possible that I did.

13. The value *M958* is known as 'Mike number' provided by Border Force. The number is designated to small boat vessels that are disposed of once the passengers have been rescued. Border Force will designate a 'Mike number' to the vessel by marking it with spray paint or another such means before it is disposed. This is to ensure that if the vessel is later found again, those finding it will know that those on board have been located and retrieved, instead of treating the vessel as another SAR incident.

14. I have reviewed the Lima Incident Log **MB/05 [INQ000246]** I note that there is entry at 05:27 stating "*BELIEVE THIS VESSEL WAS PICKED UP BY VALIANT AT 0423UTC AND ALL MIGRANTS RECOVERED AT 0436UTC AND BOAT*

MARKED AND ABANDONED WITH STROBE". Therefore, I would expect that the Mike Number had been provided by those operating Border Force vessel, *Valiant*. Border Force would therefore be the initial source of the information.

15. If it was me who entered the Mike Number onto the tracker for incident Lima, which I cannot now specifically recall, I am not certain where I obtained the number from. However, it is most likely I obtained it from an email or was told by somebody within the network. Having checked my emails from November 2021, I can see on 23 November 2021 we received a request from Belgium authorities for details of the abandoned inflatables. Within that email chain, a colleague has responded to me at 14:00 to say that Border Force had just sent the details. I then respond to a number of colleagues, including the Small Boat Tactical Commander at Dover to confirm these details are covered on the tracker. I annex the email as exhibit **MB/06 [INQ009681]**. Whilst I have been unable to locate any such emails for 24 November 2021, my expectation if I did enter the Mike Number onto the tracker it is possible I was provided with a document via email providing these numbers and I was updating the tracker to ensure we had the most up to date information, possibly to share with other authorities had there been a further request for information.

16. I do not recall there being a specific policy/procedure in respect of HMCG tracker. The tracker was developed through experience in dealing with small boat incidents and to the intention was to try and keep a summary of information that may be required or asked for on a single sheet.

17. I do not recall having any other involvement in incident "*Lima*" on 23-24 November 2021.

Operation Deveran Live Update

18. I can confirm that I have seen versions of the Operation Deveran Live Update but I cannot say whether I saw it on 23-24 November 2021. It is possible that I did.

19. My understanding of this document is that it is a Home Office/ Border Force document. I understand that a copy was provided to certain personnel at HMCG to keep them apprised of the information collated in relation to incident involving Border Force. At HMCG, we then utilised this to ensure that it matches the information we have on our own document, the HMCG tracker. As of today's date, both agencies use the same document.

20. I am not certain who specifically had access to the Operation Deveran Live Update but I know this is something I would see. I expect it is likely that others within HMCG had access such as the Small Boat Tactical Commander at Dover and potentially other Tactical Commanders, though I cannot definitively confirm. It is possible anybody who was given access to the Dover Ops general email address had access to the update.

21. I do not recall there being any policies/procedures in place regarding the Border Force tracker.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Personal Data

Signed: _____

Dated: 14 / 11 / 2024