THE CRANSTON INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF GEORGE CLOSE

I, George Close, c/o Maritime & Coastguard Agency ("**MCGA**") will say as follows:-

Introduction

1. I make this statement in my capacity as previous Maritime Tactical Commander for His Majesty's Coastguard ("**HMCG**") section of MCGA, in response to a witness evidence request dated 30 July 2024.

Background

2. I currently work in [Sensitive & Irrelevant] but prior to this worked for HMCG as a Maritime Tactical Commander. This is also known as a Network Commander. I will refer to my role as Network Commander for the duration of this statement. I left this role 9 months ago.

3. I worked at HMCG from December 2014 to November 2023 having progressed through various levels at HMCG. When I first joined I was a Maritime Operations Officer ("**MOO**"), I was then promoted to Senior Maritime Operations Officer

Operations Officer ("**SMOO**") in 2017. Following that, I became a Maritime Operations Team Leader ("**Team Leader**") in June 2020.

4.   On the night of 24 November 2021, I was in the role I was in when I left HMCG, that is, a Network Commander. I assumed this role in February 2021.

Training

5.   I was provided with a significant amount of training throughout my time at HMCG. When I initially joined as a MOO, I undertook the maritime operations officer course. This involved a number of different areas of training including maritime search planning, mission conduct and incident command, communications, land search planning, nautical knowledge and counter pollution, among other things. At the end of the course, there was a mixture of practical and written examinations. This was my foundational training and was conducted over the course of 14 months, which confirmed my appointment as a MOO.

6.   In order to become a SMOO, a civil service interview is first completed prior to undertaking two, two week training courses. The first fortnight was focused on maritime incidents and the second was on search planning. This four week period culminated in a practical examination of incident management and then a written and practical examination where we had to plan a search on a paper chart and a computer.

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7. After I had become a SMOO, I undertook continuing professional development and did a number of additional training exercises on various topics, for example, training on evacuating a large passenger vessel.

8. When I became a Maritime Operations Team Leader I started line managing other individuals within HMCG. As such, I received additional internal training on leadership and management.

9. When I assumed the role of Network Commander, I did not have to attend a training course but I did shadow Matt West for a period of time. Matt is experienced and has been a Network Commander since 2014 and with the HMCG for around 25 years. I shadowed Matt for around a month and he showed me how to do all aspects of the role and we shared the lead on a number of shifts. From memory, by Mid-March or early-April, I was able to lead shifts myself. From that point on I would do shifts independently or alongside Matt and, by November 2021, I was very comfortable within the role, albeit there was no specific formal training for the role.

Training in relation to small boats

10. At the time I became a Maritime Operations Team Leader, I remember migrant crossings started becoming more prevalent and, due to this, I was invited to informal briefings about the migrant situation and developments and we were provided with some guidance on how to handle migrant incidents in the English Channel. At that moment in time it was more of an issue in the Mediterranean but

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HMCG were definitely following it and trying to understand how to respond if migrants started crossing the English Channel, which we anticipated would happen. I cannot recall exactly when this was but it would have been sometime in 2020 as I believe I was a Team Leader at the time.

11. The situation with small boat crossings was dynamic and largely for HMCG, we were responding to increased prevalence. Whilst I do not recall specific formal training, I do remember taking part in an exercise of an overloaded fishing vessel off the Dungeness coast that capsized. This was based on similar scenarios that had occurred in the Mediterranean where a large number of people had been on an unsuitable vessel and had sunk/capsized or passengers had entered the water. The scenario would be based on there being hundreds of passengers on the vessel. This occurred in the period where a single small boat crossing was considered a rare event. We were asked what we would do in that situation. The upshot of that training was effectively, like most rescue missions, HMCG would deploy maximum resources wherever possible. Responding to a small boat crossing is alike to how you would respond to a small overloaded vessel in distress, by deploying the appropriate numbers of assets to rapidly locate and rescue the persons to a place of safety. The major challenge however is that in a traditional SAR incident the persons are actively attempting to assist you to locate and rescue them, with small boat crossings regrettably persons often mislead the situation they are in by either exaggerating the situation onboard or by following the instructions of others who did not have their best interest at heart.

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12. I also remember undertaking training in relation to the proposed 'turnaround tactics' that Border Force were trying to implement in 2021 to deal with increasing migrant crossings. We had some training on this and we did speak about situations when it would be appropriate to use such tactics and how to log it internally if these tactics were used but, other than that, I cannot recall any specific training.

Role of Network Commander

13. There is a significant change when you move into a Network Commander role. As Network Commander, it is crucial that you view the operations through a different lens. You are less concerned with the team in your immediate vicinity as you are in a Team Leader role and, instead, have to step back from the minute details and consider support needed for 11 different stations around the UK, how they interact and the overall delivery of HMCG as a service.

14. As a Network Commander, you are also introduced into the world of governance reports, fatality reports and a significant amount of additional administration that comes with the role. I also had additional responsibilities for dealing with external engagement with stakeholders outside of HMCG whilst I was Network Commander. This was not uncommon as each Network Commander had additional responsibilities to assist in the management of the station.

15. In preparing to provide this statement I have had the opportunity to review the Maritimes Operation Controller job description **GC/01 [INQ000403]** and can

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confirm that this broadly reflects my role. I would add that under the context section of the document, there is a third delivery discipline of the aviation component, Aeronautical Operations.

16. Additionally, the job role indicates that "*provide the UK Strategic Maritime Commander with a regularly updated analysis of the risk picture for their delegated area of responsibility and/or functions, including recommendations for tactical adjustments to the national resource and workload distribution*". In practice, the Network Commanders would actively perform this themselves. Only escalations to the Strategic Commander would occur, with the exception of the daily 'Network Numbers' excel document supplied in email to them after the 09:00hrs and 21:00hrs conference call.

17. In terms of the day to day role, it was pretty varied. Despite this, I would do the same four things every time I arrived. If I was on a day shift, I would arrive at the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre ("**JRCC**") around 06:50, log into my computer, and then would begin the handover from the Network Commander from the night previous shortly after.

18. During this handover, I would be informed of any pinch points within the network namely; staffing, technical outages, demand and events. I would then review the outstanding incidents and discuss these, discuss the weather and the forecast for the day ahead and then discuss any other business. This handover would usually take around 10-15 minutes and, after this, I would start planning for the daily 9:00 conference call and conducting a deeper review into incidents not covered in the

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handover. On this call, there would be an individual from each of the 11 stations around the UK, certain specialist functions and HMCG staff embedded in certain organisations or on call. I would discuss the day ahead and there was a standard agenda, known as the Teleconference Proforma that we would run through **GC/02 [INQ003767].**

19. Following the 9:00 conference call, my role was extremely varied and Network Commanders were expected to be very reactive to any incidents or issues that arose throughout the network during the day. I also had to provide tactical support and guidance to operational teams, ensure continuity of network support and ensure there were sufficient continuity plans in place for any planned or unplanned disruption to the network

Network Commander within HMCG leadership framework

20. Within the JRCC Operations room there is generally (if a full complement is present) a watch team of eight MOOs. They are responsible for communications, taking 999 calls, radio messages, coordinating low level incidents and other things. They are the essential delivery component. There are then two SMOOs that sit above them. The SMOOs don't necessarily manage the MOOs but do run the team operationally, run the incidents, act as Search and Rescue Mission Coordinators, direct MOOs and are responsible for a certain level of reporting. Lastly two Team Leaders are responsible for managing and looking after the SMOOs and the MOOs.

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21. This is assuming all persons are present; there is no one on annual leave, training, or sick. Staffing numbers throughout the year however fluctuated based on "Recommended Staffing Levels" abbreviated to "RSL". This was based on analysis of incident activity predicted over different periods and the required numbers to deliver all of HMCG's missions and functions. RSL for example would be higher in the summer daytime (where statistically far more calls/incidents occur) compared to a winter night shift.

22. At the JRCC the next step up is the Network Commander, who sits in the same operations room but delivers network wide oversight and manages the service on a day to day basis, the JRCC is the only location with this role in place.

23. There are also Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre ("**MRCC**") Commanders that are present at each station outside of the JRCC, for example, Dover. The MRCC Commander is responsible for managing their own station, and providing to the National Network the required complement of staff to contribute to HMCGs operation. The MRCC Commander is a non-operational role, however they did contribute to an on-call rota to support the Network Commander as required and sat at the same grade, but with differing responsibilities.

Relationship with Air Tactical Commander

24. The Air Tactical Commander ("**Air Cdr**") was the senior watch keeping officer for the Aeronautical Co-ordination Centre ("**ARCC**"). They are responsible for co-ordinating the day to day running of the ARCC and have the final decision on

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allowing/declining aerial asset tasking. The Network Commander and Air Cdr would often work very closely to share situational awareness and would often provide timely information to one another in a reciprocal way during various incidents that would arise during a shift if they included both elements. Whilst we were independent in our responsibilities, the Air Cdr and Network Commanders often discussed matters to understand incidents from each other's perspectives. For example, sometimes the Air Cdr might not have all of the incident information that the Network Commander does from discussions had with MOO's/ SMOO's. Ultimately however, decisions relating to air control remained with the Air Cdr and Maritime decisions remained with the Network Commander.

25. There was almost always an Air Cdr in the room at the JRCC when I worked there. This was extremely beneficial as it was important that we had good relationships with Air Cdrs's. As a Network Commander, I would often have human conversations with Air Cdr's to discuss aerial asset tasking. For example, if a SMOO or MOO requested an aerial asset be tasked to an incident and it was rejected by the Air Cdr, it was easy to lean over and discuss the matter on a human level with them. I often discussed decisions with the Air Cdr's to discuss rationale from their perspective and that of HMCG. Often, this might give rise either to a change in decision or a broader understanding of why a request might have been declined. This often de-conflicted any situations where there may have been a miscommunication at lower levels. This was an important part of the working relationship between my teams and the ARCC. Additionally, Air Cdrs's were also generally really good sounding boards for Network Commanders, as

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they also had significant experience, often from a different background (i.e. aviation) despite having different responsibilities.

Relationship with Small Boats Tactical Commander

26. Another Commander that we had a relationship with was the Small Boats Tactical Commander. This role was carried out solely by George Papadopoulos and was a relatively new role that was created around February 2021 when the migrant crossings starting increasing substantially.

27. Due to the increase in migrant vessels crossing the English Channel and, consequently, the significant increase in calls from migrants that came to HMCG, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the Network Commanders to have an overall picture of the national network. This was because MOOs were getting more calls than usual and, therefore, weren't always able to input information into VISION logs which meant the Network Commander had less information to deal with. This was due to the constant nature of incoming calls, meaning verbal communications would not take place directly with the commanders.

28. In addition to this, there was a decision made to place the Joint Operations Room staff, (Border Force staff, Home Office etc) all within in a room beneath the Dover Operations Room at MRCC Dover. The idea behind the role of Small Boat Tactical Commander was that they could be based in the Dover Operations

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Room and they could have oversight of the small boat picture and provide that high level tactical support including liaising with the Joint Operations Room.

29. However, the reality of George's role was that he was still utilised as a Search Mission Coordinator ("**SMC**") within the Dover station as there was limited staff at the time with the experience and qualifications to fulfil the role of SMC. It was often the case that George would assume a SMC role, and we agreed (on a shift by shift basis) we would take the tactical role as Network Commanders from the JRCC as his skills were better utilised *'on the ground'*. In providing a SAR response, having a SMC situated within the Dover control room was more beneficial than the Tactical Commander being present.

30. Despite this, I do know that George's role began to really evolve and grow. He was being asked to advise on a whole host of things including new maritime tactics with Border Force and small boats procedures. Small boats were still an ever-growing picture with George's role in development. This placed conflicting demands of being available to watch-keep whilst also delivering these additional tasks but generally I believe he made every effort to be available to assist.

Relationship with Strategic Commander

31. Network Commanders would also have to have a relationship with Strategic Commanders. The Strategic Commander role was a hybrid role, with some Strategic Commanders working from the JRCC and others worked remotely be it

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within our headquarters (Spring Place, Southampton) or at other HMCG sites across the country. It was an additional "on call duty" to the individuals day job.

32. On 24 November 2021, Duncan Ley was Strategic Commander and was in the JRCC so I spoke to him on various occasions that day.

33. We had a document setting out a number of instances when we would have to alert the Strategic Commander **GC/03 [INQ003766]**, such as; a "spectacular incident", or one which has political sensitivity, incidents causing the death of five or more people, significant media interest or coverage, an incident where a search and rescue unit had been injured or killed, an incident where scores of people were at risk for example. We would have to call them and brief them on the situation and they would provide strategic advice. Ultimately, the Strategic Commander provides top cover and, we could use them as a sounding board.

34. Initially, when migrants were crossing the English Channel in far smaller numbers, it was expected that Network Commanders would alert Strategic Commanders of any small boat incident involving migrants. However, as these numbers increased dramatically, it was decided that the Strategic Commander didn't need to be informed of every small boat incident. As such, at the time of November 2021, we only needed to alert Strategic Commanders at the onset of migrant activity if any migrants entered the water or if there was a fatality. I cannot recall there being any further criterion in this regard.

Role and Function of Network Tactical Commander on 24 November 2021

35. On the day of 24 November 2021, myself and Matt West were jointly exercising the function of Network Commander. I arrived at the JRCC for the day shift at 06:50 and was informed that the Network Commander that was meant to be covering the shift following ours had called in sick. This led to discussions throughout the morning as to the best way to deal with this staffing issue and it was agreed later in the morning/early afternoon that I would go home and return to cover the night shift from 23:00. Duncan Ley agreed to this. From memory, George Papadopoulos was acting as an operator that day and was supporting Richard Cockerill who was acting SMOO. Richard was usually based at the JRCC but had travelled to Dover to perform shifts there.

36. Matt and I began the shift by dividing tasks. I began reviewing the small boat crossing activity and Matt focused on the wider network. This was not due to a specific specialism, it was just as a result of arbitrary division of tasks.

37. I remember reviewing outstanding incidents that had arisen during the evening of the 23 November 2021 and the morning of 24 November 2021. There was an unusually high volume of outstanding incidents and, due to the nature of migrant vessels being regarded as in 'DISTRESS' by default, it was hard to filter the incident log with your eyes as the screen was full of red 'DISTRESS' incidents, all with the "VSBC – Vessel – Small Boat Crossing" ("VSBC") incident type. I would normally scan ViSION and look at incident logs using the phase (distress being the highest priority) and incident types, working my way through all of the open incidents.

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38. It was usual practice for me and my fellow Commanders to review small boat activity when arriving on duty, as this gave us situational awareness in the network. In this instance, with Matt West being on duty, he reviewed the non-small boat crossing incidents to share the workload. At the start of a shift reviewing the activity of the network collegiately enables us to have a starting snapshot and understand where pressures might exist and where we-may need to make decisions or consider further actions later in the shift. It was difficult to triage the order of priority on the day due to the volume of incidents and lack of detail in the details box at the top of the incident and the messages entered within the log by individual operators subsequently. I began by looking to see if any VSBC incidents did not have an alphanumeric reference in them, amending this to make it easier to navigate the list before opening each.

39. I then reviewed briefly each open incident, comparing it to the HMCG Migrant Tracker to see if the tracker contained more information as in general, most VSBC incidents had little detail by nature of the calls being received and were difficult to attribute by the operations team. The process each commander uses is individual and there is no 'defined' way to review incidents when you come on duty. For myself I usually start with the oldest incidents and then work up to the current time to have an established situational awareness.

40. As Network Commanders, we are required to provide a RAG rating (Review, Actions, and Guidance) on every distress phase incident within 30 minutes. The purpose of a 'RAG' is to provide a format for Commanders to use when reviewing

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incidents, whereas previously (prior to the RAG process being implemented), each had a very individualistic approach to the first review of an incident. The introduction of the RAG rating was unrelated to small boat incidents, rather it was a system designed to provide consistency in how Network Commanders approached incidents.

41. The 'Review' is a review of the incident narrative and detail, 'Actions' refer to actions taken by the Commander in response to the incident if pertinent and 'Guidance' is the guidance to the operational team from the Commander (i.e 'Consider XYZ' or 'Inform ZYX'). In VSBC incidents, the RAG format was not always used as often there was insufficient information to make a meaningful entry. The RAG did not replace the mission conduct process, whereby the operational team would plan and execute the mission conduct process in response to an incident.

42. Furthermore, our layout used in ViSION is different to the standard "operational" layout and includes boxes which show "RAG'd" and "Non-RAG'd" incidents (based on the incident being assigned a 'Tag' by the system or ourselves). Knowing the incidents with this tag had already been seen by my colleague on the night shift, I prioritised the "Non-RAG'd" incidents, as these had not had a Commander review them.

43. Using this tag both serves to ensure we meet the requirement to RAG distress phase incidents but also during VSBC incidents made it easier to filter those we had not already seen, without checking every individual log.

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44. With regards to Duncan Ley, the Strategic Commander on 24 November 2021, as mentioned previously, he was present in the JRCC on the day. Whilst I did have a few conversations with him during the day, they were primarily around the sickness cover later in the evening and the fact that whilst we had a lot of crossings, there were no incidents that required escalation to the Strategic Commander.

Implementation of Network Flexing on 24 November 2021

45. Following the conference call at 9:00 on 24 November, at 10:01:03 and 10:05:50 I did put an entry into the network management log **GC/04 [INQ000233]** to indicate that talk boxes had been implemented to assist with communications relating to small boat crossing activity. In **GC/05 [INQ000235]** at 09:52:15 I also confirmed with Richard Cockerill, who was the SMC at Dover, the network support in place met his needs. In the same entry, we also discussed his intentions to task SAR-H to offset a brief gap in aviation coverage by SAR-F (in lay terms, using a helicopter to briefly cover the gap between one plane leaving and another plane/drone arriving – achieving constant coverage). Decisions around Network flexing would be made by either Matt West or myself. We would confirm our intentions to allow any gaps to be spotted or if there were conflicts with other cover, arrangements or continuity measures could be put in place.

46. In relation to my entry regarding allocation of talk boxes, I can see that I recorded the following rationale at 10:05:50;

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RATIONALE BEHIND THIS IS THE HIGH VOLUME OF COMMUNICATIONS

COMING FROM THE COLO TO THE DOVER SMC PREVENTING THE CHN

16 OPERATOR FROM COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY TO DOVER OPS

47. Expanding on this, overnight there was one individual responsible for monitoring the international distress frequency (channel 16) radio for any transmissions of boats in distress, which is standard practice for this area due to high workloads and commonly used to free up additional operators for other tasks due to the volume of traffic received being suitable for a single channel 16 operator. However, this means that the individual monitoring channel 16 cannot monitor phones. On 24 November 2024 the individual monitoring channel 16 was at the JRCC, which isn't unexpected. However, there were five people within the Dover Operations Room acting as operators, including George Papadopoulos. Combined with other roles in the building (The Coastguard Liaison Officer ("COLO"), UK Border Force personnel etc) they were having difficulty performing their role whilst also being able to communicate with the SMC effectively (such as to pass on the response to a message, or ask for a clarification about a tasking). The SMC was using the same TalkBox to speak to other roles, leading to constant background chatter, which was disruptive to the channel 16 operator who is required to maintain a listening watch for traffic on the radio.

48. Assignment of TalkBoxes is a common occurrence, as it acts as a private radio channel only HMCG personnel can use in the network to communicate and this

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achieved demarcation of usage. Talkboxes are assigned by the Network Commander(s) as they are a finite resource.

49. At 09:52:15 I made the following entry in the incident log **GC/05**:

    a. *DISCUSSION WITH RCOCKERILL (SMC) – CONFIRMED NETWORK SUPPORT (1X CH16 & 1X ROUTINE DESK) @ SOLENT TO SUPPORT DOVER – NO FURTHER SUPPORT REQUIRED ATT – CONFIRMED REF. AIRCRAFT – TEKEVER DRONE UNABLE TO COVER AREA APPROX. COVERED BY PATROL BOX DELTA (SOUTH OF DUNGENESS) – REQUESTING SAR-H TO FILL THE GAP UNTIL FIXED WING ARRIVES DUE TO 20 MINUTE DIFFERENCE FOR DOMAIN AWARENESS – CONFIRMED CHARLIE & DELTA PATROL BOXES*

50. I believe Richard Cockerill contacted me, to discuss the tasking of the latter half of the message (the intention to use SAR-H to cover a brief interruption in SAR-F cover) and I took the opportunity to confirm with him that the network support in place (16's at JRCC, 1 'routine' desk) was sufficient, which he agreed. It was felt by myself and colleagues that providing another individual to the Dover Operations Room that was remote and not with the room itself would not be beneficial to the operators in Dover, as the remote operator misses the small exchanges of information between individuals co-located together, impacting on mission coordination. Instead, we used the network flexing to add another individual to monitor Channel 16 in Dover as this is a role that can be effectively

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done remotely, and had a single operator remotely on routines to catch any overflow calls or communications that go unanswered.

51. The reasoning behind flexing the network in this way was due to the sheer number of small boats incidents that the Dover operations room were dealing with that day. We did consider using the network flexing to add another operator to monitor phone calls arriving but past experience has told us that sometimes this is not always beneficial as an excessive amount of operators receiving phone calls means that 'events' are created too quickly (often duplications of the same vessels) and does not allow the SMC time to deal with them. This creates a snowballing effect of more and more information coming in than the operations team can effectively sort through and respond.

ViSION log MIKE – Entry at 10:09 on 24 November 2021

52. In VISION log MIKE **GC/06 [INQ000250],** I added the following comment at 10:09: "*VALIANT ON SCENE W/CHARLIE & NUMEROUS VSLS AROUND POSSIBLE MIGRANT INCIDENT MIKE – R175 & CG22 IS PROCEEDING FOR DOMAIN AWARENESS PATROL BOX CHARLIE AND DELTA*". It is important to note that in the context of this entry, I was noting information in relation to incident 'MIKE'. Prior to making this entry, I would have reviewed the VISION log and noted Neal Gibson's entry at 03:47:30 that states: "*VALIANT SEARCHING FOR CHARLIE AND HAS SPOTTED MULTIPLE TARGETS AND IS INVESTIGATING*". I then reviewed this entry against a live tracker, noting this incident had not been updated for a couple of hours and the tracker often showed

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more updated information. We knew there was a cluster of vessels around the area that VALIANT was investigating in relation to incident 'CHARLIE' as identified by Neal Gibson's entry.

53. This comment was not intended to suggest that CHARLIE had been recovered or identified by VALIANT but, instead, that incident MIKE may relate to one of the vessels found when VALIANT was searching for CHARLIE. When I use the words *'on scene w/CHARLIE'* this was derived from incident CHARLIE **GC/07 [INQ000237]** showing the asset VALIANT as on scene at 03:25:11 and a later entry at 03:35 investigating 2 potential targets, followed latterly at 03:50:58 that it was on scene with a vessel. The incident narrative then shows that VALIANT responded to multiple other vessels in the area, recovering persons up until it was released at 06:46:15 by SDOWNS. I could however not definitely say, nor was I intending to say that CHARLIE had been discovered. I also noted that there were two aerial assets, R175 and CG22, proceeding to the area to confirm what vessels were there as part of the broader search and rescue operation.

54. The reasoning behind my entry into this incident was I was reviewing the incidents based on RAG status, which I changed at 10:09:58. In doing so I was seeking to determine which incidents were 'live' and needed further oversight and which were concluded to ensure our RAGs were up to date. This RAG entry was to capture the situation as depicted in the incidents.

ViSION log CHARLIE – Entry at 10:08 on 24 November 2021

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55. With regards to ViSION log CHARLIE from 24 November 2021, I updated this at 07:30 following the handover from the Network Commander on the previous shift. I updated the position field of CHARLIE to reflect its alphanumerical reference, which was used by HMCG to assist in identification of incidents in the ViSION system. This is purely an administrative task that I tend to do immediately after the handover to make sure the ViSION incident logs are up to date and assist in my navigating between incidents. It is done without changing the incident's actual location on the system, which remained where it was created.

56. At 10:08, I added the following comment: *"NOTE FROM TRACKER THIS INCIDENT SHOWS AS RESOLVED – VALIANT TASKED – CONFIRMED 41 RECOVERED AND VSL ABANDONED".* This was as a result of my review of the MRCC MIGRANT TRACKER **GC/08 [INQ001234]** which, at the time I reviewed it, was showing CHARLIE as resolved at around 10:00. This is in addition to the entries made against *VALIANT* within incident Charlie itself, indicating it was engaged in Search and Rescue (**"SAR"**) operations and recovering different vessels which supported the information available to me (tracker showing as resolved, narrative showing casualties recovered and asset released).

57. In addition, within the trackers and on ViSION, there were usually duplicates of migrant incidents as the operators would get calls from multiple individuals on board the same migrant vessel who would report that they were in distress and needed help and then, sometimes, throw their phone into the sea. Every time a call came in a new incident was created on the tracker but, once migrant vessels were found by maritime assets, information on boat size, persons on board,

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caller's name etc. would be compared and, if it became apparent separate calls were from the same boat, incidents would be made 'repeats of' to form one incident. The repeats would be closed and logged against the parent incident in ViSION.

58. This tracker was updated throughout the day dependent on the status of various incidents and I often used the tracker and VISION logs to determine the status of migrant incidents to aid in establishing and maintaining situational awareness of activity in the network. Often the tracker was a more accurate representation of where a migrant incident was up to, as it was updated in real time in conjunction with Border Force. VISION logs weren't updated as regularly due to the demands placed on the Dover Ops team so there were times when there were very few entries on the ViSION log but you would look at the tracker and it would say that the migrant vessel had been recovered. In preparing to provide this statement however I also note that NGIBSON made an entry at 04:36:10 *'ALL MIGRANTS DISEMBARKED BOAT HAS BEEN MARKED AND STROBE INPUT// AWAITING FINAL TOTAL OF PERSONS RECOVERED'*. A further entry was made by SDOWNS at 06:31:16 which stated "*VESSEL DEAD IN THE WATER, CASULITIES WAVING FROM MCC M959*", which again would suggest the migrants had been recovered and vessels abandoned. The latter indicating the vessel (identified in the narrative) had been spotted, which would indicate *VALIANT* then went to the assistance of the passengers.

59. The tracker and the VISION logs would have been the only sources that I relied on. In this instance, as *VALIANT* was noted as recovering and disembarking

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migrants earlier on in the evening, I would have considered this information, including that which was noted on the tracker, and formed a point of view that the migrants had been recovered and the migrant vessel abandoned. At this point, I added a RAG tag and moved onto the numerous other incidents that needed my attention on that day.

60. In the role of Network Commander, I would rely on the information noted by others who are trained, qualified and experienced in their role. The role can be exceptionally busy and 24 November 2021 was an extremely busy day for migrant crossings. As such, I did not have time to call various individuals updating the tracker and the ViSION logs to ask them where they got their information from and whether they could confirm that it was in fact correct. In any case, the individual that updated the ViSION log, SDOWNS, had returned home following the conclusion of the night shift so wouldn't have been contactable in this particular circumstance. Calling persons to clarify information would also impact on the coordination happening and unless there was a distinct need would not normally occur. It is worth noting, that training in HMCG teaches staff that ViSION is the official log, and entries made in it should be factual and clear and if incorrect, an entry made to indicate such.

61. Based on the information presented to me at the time, I had no reason to doubt that the information relating to incident CHARLIE wasn't correct. There was sufficient patrol activity from maritime assets that accurate information was expected and assumed and I had no reason to doubt the information I was receiving in relation to incident CHARLIE wasn't accurate

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62. Between 10:08 when I noted that incident *CHARLIE* was resolved in the VISION log and 15:21 when incident *CHARLIE* was closed, I did not re-consider incident CHARLIE for two reasons. First, when I added the RAG tag to incident CHARLIE and noted it was resolved based on information presented to me I would have prioritised the other migrant incidents that day, of which there were many and still actively being treated as SAR incidents. There was nothing drawing me back to incident *CHARLIE* as no new information had come to light in the time I was at the JRCC. Second, I left the JRCC just after 12:00 that day so wouldn't have had time to re-consider it.

63. Incident *CHARLIE* was not closed at the same time as it was marked as resolved on the tracker because I anticipate (although I cannot confirm) that the operations team at Dover had not had the opportunity to update and perform the closing actions required by HMCG when an incident is resolved. My entry and addition of a RAG tag would not have had a bearing upon this as the process of closing an incident is led by the operations team and not the Network Commander. The operations team would consult with the Commander if there was a particular action required to enable them to do so. An example of this would be if a specific action plan required the operator to inform the Strategic Commander, which exists in the Ship Security Alert incident type, which is not small boat related.

64. I would normally expect, as was procedure, that the incident would have an entry by the SMOO or Team Leader running the watch at Dover saying they were

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happy to close the incident, with the summary actions performed by a MOO; however it was common VSBC for this entry not to happen due to the volume of incidents requiring messages.

65. In terms of the circumstances in which incident *CHARLIE* was closed, I was no longer on shift and therefore not able to comment on precisely why it was closed. However, my expectation would be that the person closing the incident, who I understand from the ViSION log to be [MOO] would speak to the team leader or SMOO in the Dover operations room and close any jobs marked as resolved on the migrant tracker, whilst also checking the ViSION log to understand why the incident was thought to be resolved.

Levels of support provided following the incident

66. Generally, I would differentiate the support that Matt West and I received as Network Commanders and the support that was received by the teams that we managed in the network around the UK.

Support received by Network Commanders following the incident

67. I don't remember receiving any specific post incident follow up after 24 November 2021 relating to the incident until the announcement of the MAIB investigation.

68. I believe I was provided with some information around the employee assistance programme ("**EAP**") but, generally, post incident follow ups were reserved for MOOs, SMOOs and Team Leaders. I think that, as Network Commanders, we were expected to be part of the support structure for the individuals we managed. As each Network Commander had typically risen through these roles, we brought our own experiences and methods to support teams and colleagues.

69. I consider myself a very mentally resilient person and I didn't feel the need to reach out for support at the time.

Support for Operations teams

70. Following the incident, as a Network Commander, it was important that I was having conversations with Team Leaders and SMOOs that were on duty that day to check on their welfare and ensure they were looking out for the MOOs on the watch. This is because as a Network Commander, you do not sit with the operations team and would have limited face to face contact with them to notice any unusual behaviours so it was essential that the management on the watch (Team Leaders and SMOOs) were vigilant and supported them. I would direct individuals to the various support networks available namely: the MCA Employee Assistance Programme, HMCG chaplain, the Charity for Civil Servants and volunteer TRiM trained staff. The TRiM trained staff would speak to HMCG colleagues that had been affected by the events of 24 November 2021. I do not recall being aware of anyone coming to me to seek out this guidance.
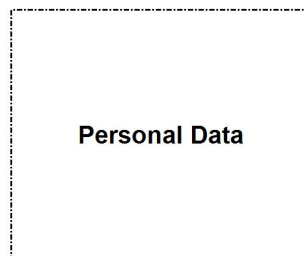
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71. I know that there was a lot of concern from the operations Teams in the aftermath of the incident about the follow up, given the number of fatalities and the level of reporting it was receiving. Matt and I tried to manage these concerns and spoke to various individuals around the post-incident review process and other processes they may have had to be involved in following the incident to make them aware of what would occur.

72. In terms of the adequacy of support provided, I would say that HMCG's support processes were slightly old school when it came to mental health and dealing with trauma when I was there. Personally, I didn't struggle in the aftermath of traumatic incidents but I did know of colleagues that struggled to deal with death (not specific to the events of November 21). There were signs it was getting better before I left as HMCG did produce a mental health toolkit and was investigating an improved Occupational Health provision. I think the organisation realised that support provision was lacking at the time and needed to be improved.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed:

Personal Data

91256857-1

Dated: 06-December-2024