

Witness Name: George Close
Statement No.: [2]
Exhibits: [7]
Dated: 31.01.2025

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 14 January 2025. I make this statement in addition to my earlier statement dated 06 December 2024 ("**WS1**").

ViSION Log Entries

2. Whenever Maritime Tactical Commanders come onto shift, they inherit the oversight of incidents from the previous shift, albeit the operations remain with the relevant stations. Part of that role is to review incidents and provide the "RAG" rating, with "distress" incidents requiring a RAG entry within 30 minutes, all non-distress incidents at the Commanders discretion. By virtue of the fact HMCG is a shift structured organisation, Maritime Tactical Commanders are expected to have oversight of whatever incidents are live when they start their shift, irrespective of whether they were directly involved in that incident earlier. Due to the nature of the role, the activity within the network would not necessarily always

start and finish during each shift. As such, as a Maritime Tactical Commander you would rarely start the shift with no ongoing incidents. It was standard procedure during the handover process to receive a briefing from the outgoing Maritime Tactical Commander on any notable incidents or incidents we should be following or actively aware of.

3. It would therefore be an accepted practice for Maritime Tactical Commanders to create entries on ViSION regarding incidents they were not directly involved in. Incidents would be reviewed on the basis of the information provided to them by those dealing with the incident either in ViSION itself, the HMCG tracker (the "**Tracker**") during small boat crossing incidents or sometimes by speaking to those involved in the operations team at the relevant station. If the MRCC was not so busy during small boat crossing incidents, the operations teams may have had more time to make resolution entries on ViSION themselves but, due to the extremely busy nature of small boat crossings, this was not always possible. Therefore, Maritime Tactical Commanders could take a pragmatic approach to analysing the information available and deduce in certain circumstances that an incident had been resolved even where the operations teams had not made a positive entry to indicate this.
4. Such an entry made would be based on the information contained within the systems, which is visible to all involved. It would not preclude the operations team from conducting further work on the incident if more information became available.

5. In paragraph 39 of WS1 I make reference to the fact that the RAG rating was *"not always used as often as there was insufficient information to make a meaningful entry"*. Conducting an effective RAG review was challenging with small boat crossings due to the lack of information provided to us by those attempting to cross the channel, coupled with the large number of incidents, many of which were often duplicates. This made it difficult to input a meaningful entry due to the extremely ambiguous information available to us. Some incidents had a more effective RAG review than others and this was based on the quality of the information available. However, as stated in WS1, the RAG review would not affect the mission conduct process. The RAG process also served to indicate to those reviewing incidents that a Maritime Tactical Commander had given relevant input (to the extent they were able) by the fact the incident was "RAG-tagged".

6. In terms of 24 November 2021, I can only comment on the incidents where I conducted a RAG rating. Whilst I reviewed all incidents briefly (i.e. a scan of those incidents) I only made a RAG entry on Mike and Charlie. In terms of Charlie, I felt there was sufficient information at the time to conduct a RAG review, given that the information on ViSION and the Tracker indicated that the incident was resolved. Therefore, based on the information readily available to me I was sufficiently confident in the review. So far as I am now able to recall, many of the incidents open on the 24 November 21 were significantly old, meaning they had not been open for many hours, and lacked any advancement on the initial call collection. This meant that a RAG entry would add no value to

the incident compared to those with more information in them and so those with additional information were prioritised.

7. On the other hand, Mike is a good example of having insufficient information to conduct an effective RAG rating. I was limited to the knowledge that a vessel had been sighted in French waters initially, it was then reported that the vessel was in the UKSRR and multiple vessels were spotted in the vicinity of Charlie. It was reasonable to delineate that one of these vessels could be Mike. The "G" or "guidance" element of the RAG rating would simply be to continue searching until there was more sufficient understanding that Mike had been discovered. The limited information regarding Mike made the RAG difficult to conduct. From what I recall, many incidents were being targeted by the same assets (by nature of being in the same geographic area) leading to comments being made regarding the overall situation in the channel in the VSBC Admin Incident and Network Management log.

8. It is important to understand what when I referred to "Mike" or "Charlie" at the time of making my entries I was considering them as incidents rather than vessels. Naturally, there was more reported incidents than there was actual vessels so where I refer to another alphanumeric incident within another VISION log it refers to a corresponding incident rather than the vessel (or small boat) itself. It was unusual for the search and rescue unit ("SRU") to be able to definitively confirm the vessels identity, due to language difficulties or a lack of forthcoming information from those on board.

RAG Review of MIKE

9. My entry onto the Mike ViSION log was made to effectively add an update as to what was happening at the moment. I had drawn the conclusion that Mike *might* be one of the vessels with Valiant, having understood from Charlie incident that there were a number of vessels in that area. My entry was not intended to draw any conclusion that Mike had been located. Therefore, the fact this was not reflected in the tracker at 10:09 (**Exhibit GC2/1; INQ006855**) would not have had any bearing on the entry one way or the other. At the time of my review I was aware that there were aviation and maritime assets in the area. Given that there was uncertainty, I was content to wait and allow the picture to develop and once further information was available staff could attempt to marry up the reports and attribute information based on the assets deployed and any further information.

10. As a Maritime Tactical Commander conducting a review I would not update the Tracker to close incidents. The operations team are at the coalface and they would therefore update the Tracker with any "closed" incidents. Given that Mike was not closed on the Tracker at that time, I would not update it to suggest it was as my assessment at that time was that Mike could be one of the vessels on scene with Valliant and referenced in Charlie ViSION log. It would not be standard practice for me to update the Tracker to confirm incidents were closed in those circumstances. Indeed the Maritime Tactical Commander by virtue of the role would not update the Tracker at all unless in extremis.

11. Ultimately, the operations team at Dover were coordinating a range of search and rescue activity for a number of vessels that they didn't know the specific location for. From an overview perspective, I would be looking to attempt to draw a thread between incidents based on any information known to us in order to support my tactical oversight of the situation and support the operational coordination. However, there would be no specific actions for me to undertake based on this information. The entry might have prompted Dover to ask Valiant (when speaking to them in relation to incident Charlie) to try and find out, by speaking to persons they rescued, whether Mike had in fact also been located.

12. My reference to "*on scene with Charlie*" on Mike ViSION log is again delineated from the entries in Charlie ViSION log, as outlined in WS1, where I was able to deduce that Mike *may* be one of those vessels referred to in the Charlie ViSION log relating to that incident. As explained in paragraph 53 of WS1 I was not intending to say that Charlie had been located by Valiant. However, it was reasonable to deduce that Mike may have been one of the vessel's thought to be on scene with Charlie, albeit I could not definitely say that one of those vessels referred to in the Charlie ViSION log was definitely Charlie.

13. I would also not be able to confirm which vessel I understood the entry at 03:50 on Charlie ViSION log to be referring to. It was impossible at the time based on the information available to us to definitively know which vessel had been identified at that specific time. What was known was that there were several vessels in the area that Valiant had been tasked to attend in response to Charlie.

14. Therefore, I felt it was reasonable at the time to deduce by geographic location that one of the vessels recovered was Charlie, though I could not definitely say which of those vessels Charlie was.

15. In terms of Valiant's location at 10:09, I would not have had specific knowledge of where its location was at that time. I would have been relying on the professional competency of the operations team coordinating the search that they were satisfied Valiant was searching or had searched the area it had been tasked to search. My role would have been an oversight role so it wouldn't be usual practice for me to understand the specific location of Valiant unless there was anything specific to cause me concern that Valiant was in the wrong location, which wasn't the case at the time.

16. Whilst I could not definitely say that Charlie had been recovered, which is not dissimilar to other small boat incidents, I was satisfied based on the information readily available to me that it was reasonable to conclude that the incident was resolved. Tactically, I knew we had a range of search and rescue ("SAR") operations being conducted in the Channel with multiple assets involved. I knew from the information within ViSION that Valiant had been in the vicinity of the reported last known location for Charlie and I knew that a number of vessels had been recovered. Additionally, I knew that no further information had been called in to suggest that Charlie had not been recovered. The operational team had indicated on the Tracker that the incident was resolved and therefore based on the information I had, I was reassured that it was reasonable to believe that the incident was resolved.

17. The reason I say I could not definitely say Charlie had been discovered is that by the very nature of small boat crossings, HMCG are often limited in their ability to reconcile reports from migrants on small boats with specific incidents. Sadly, in my experience, this is because migrant passengers of small boats are generally unwilling or unable to provide information upon rescue to confirm which incident they belong to, what phone number they called from or their personal information. The information regarding the number of people on board was also often inaccurate but given the crowded nature of the vessels and the circumstances those on board found themselves in, this was not unusual.

The Tracker

18. In WS1 paragraph 52 I have stated that the HMCG tracker "*often showed more updated information*" than the ViSION logs. I understand that this is because the Tracker was a live document with all incidents contained within one spreadsheet so information was being updated more regularly. I understand this was simply easier and quicker to update in a dynamic situation during busy periods for operators. The demands of small boat crossings meant that keeping individual ViSION logs updated was often more time consuming so, as things were happening in the network, the Tracker was sometimes more up to date.
19. In WS1 at paragraph 52 I have referred to tracker document (**Exhibit GC2/2; INQ001234**). The reference to this document was an error. My reference to the

Tracker in WS1 was intended to be a reference to the Tracker as a whole. At the relevant time, the Tracker was one live spreadsheet.

20. However, I understand that in retrospect the MCA have been able to provide the Inquiry different iterations of the Tracker. I cannot now say whether I would have seen the version that was sent to Griz-Nez 07:54.

21. I also cannot confirm exactly what version of the Tracker I would have reviewed at the relevant time when making my entries onto the ViSION logs. However, I expect it would have been sometime between 09:55am – 10:10am and therefore versions **(Exhibit GC2/3; INQ006852, Exhibit GC2/4; INQ006853, Exhibit GC2/5 INQ006854, Exhibit GC2/6; INQ006855)**, all of which identify Charlie as being resolved. Whilst I cannot specifically state at what exact time I would have consulted the Tracker, these are approximations based on the work I conducted that day.

22. I do not believe I would have consulted the Operation Deveran Live Update **(Exhibit GC2/7 INQ001249)** as it contained information ordinarily taken from the Tracker. Having reviewed the report in retrospect I do not consider it would have had any bearing on the entries I made.

Charlie Incident

23. As explained earlier in this statement, I could never definitely say that Charlie had been resolved. However, I was content at the time that Charlie was resolved

because an asset had arrived and found several vessels in the vicinity Charlie was reported and the operations team had marked it as resolved. I still wouldn't be able to definitively say which of those vessels recovered Charlie. However, the logical deduction is that based on the geographic proximity and the vessel and multiple vessels being found, I felt one of them could reasonably be deduced as Charlie, which appeared to be the conclusion drawn by those working on the incident more closely.

24. However, I did not expect this to be confirmed until much later when further analysis had taken place later that day. As part of end of day activities during small boat crossings, sweeps of the channel would be made by assets to identify any outstanding vessels still crossing and the number (or lack thereof) of new emergency calls, allowing the operations team to deduce if all vessels had finished crossing. A final statement from the SMC in charge of the incident would be made with the final determination of the incident before it would be summarised and closed (usually by a MOO). From a tactical level I was sufficiently reassured that an incident had been reported in the location of Charlie, an asset had been sent and recovered multiple vessels which supported information we had initially received. There was also no indication that the operations team were concerned it had not been found. I had no reason to believe Charlie had not been found and felt it reasonable to deduce that it had.

25. The source materials I relied upon to conclude that the incident had been resolved would have been ViSION and the Tracker. I believe that it was the Tracker that led me to make the entry "41 recovered and vessel abandoned" but

I cannot be sure about this. I would have been working at pace to correlate information as part of my review of the incident.

26. The entry I have made onto Charlie ViSION log was not in reality stating anything that was not already deduced by the operations team at Dover, namely that Charlie had been discovered, as they had reflected in the Tracker. Therefore my entry just reiterated what was already on the documentation and would not have prevented further actions being taken on this incident. Those coordinating the mission had already formed the view that Charlie had been discovered but it would not be closed until later in the day when final analysis of the Channel had taken place by the operations team. Had more information come to the light, the incident itself remained on the system and the operations team could have updated ViSION. The practice of resolved incidents or incidents without clear resolution remaining open until the end of the day or when the activity slowed down or stopped was not unusual. This is due to the demand and pressure on the network during small boat crossing activity. Those incidents would generally be closed later alongside others when time permitted.

27. The Tracker was a product of a challenging time and challenging circumstances as a result of dealing with large numbers of incidents, but it was never intended to be, to the best of my knowledge, a gold plated solution to small boat crossings. It was a pragmatic solution to work around some of the issues HMCG faced during small boat crossing SAR and enable greater collaboration with our partners.

Statement of Truth

I believe the content of this statement to be true.

Signed: Personal Data
George Close

Dated: 31.01.2025