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DCOS/G1/02

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29 Jun 04

LEARNING ACCOUNT INTO THE RNTT BORDER INCIDENT – SHAAT AL ARAB **WATERWAY 21 JUNE 2004**

References:

- A. Land Command Standing Order No 3207 dated Sep 03.
- B. 1 Mech Bde COS/G3 Plans/005 dated 22 Jun 04.
- C. 1 Mech Bde COS/G3 Plans/005 dated 26 Jun 04.
- D. MND (SE) MI Sect J2 Initial Report J2/0024/1 dated 25 Jun 04.
- E. MND (SE) MI Sect J2 Report J2/0024/1 dated 26 Jun 04.
- 20 Armd Bde FRAGO 226 Operation Hillsborough (Standing Operation to Counter Iraqi F. River Piracy on the Shatt Al Arab)- dated 13 Apr 04.
- HO 1 Mech Bde G6/6010 ' G. ' dated 13 May 04.
- H. D/FLEET/N3/3/202/1/1a 'Iraqi Coastal and Riverine Surveillance Recce Report' dated 1 Apr 04.

INTRODUCTION

- As a means of consolidating events in respect of this incident this report is initiated as a 1. Learning Account in accordance with Ref A. The aim of the Learning Account is to raise a formal record of recommendations to prevent a recurrence immediately following the incident.
- This report is not intended to be an account of events after capture as this is subject to a specialist debrief and report by MND(SE) J2. Therefore this report will not draw any lessons learnt from post capture events. Furthermore, this report is based on accounts already submitted under the cover of Ref B and C transposed and cross referenced with those accounts given in the MND (SE) J2 Initial Report and Final Report Refs D and E respectively.

BACKGROUND TO INCIDENT

The RNTT was formed in Aug 03 and comprises a small team of RN & RM personnel currently deployed on Op TELIC 4, under the command (TACOM) of 1 Mech Bde. The HQ element of the Royal Navy Training Team (RNTT) is based at Basra APOD embedded within HQ 1 Mech Bde. In order to operate it has a number of Forward Operating Bases (FOB); the Basra Shaat Al Arab Hotel (SAAH), Umm Qasr (UQ) North Port and Abu Al Fulus (AAF). Its function

is to provide mentoring advice and training to the Iraqi Riverine Patrol Service (IRPS) in the conduct of Boarding and Riverine Operations.

3. On 21 June 2004 the RNTT planned to conduct a routine administrative move between Umm Qasr (UQ) and Basra SAAH in order to replace an unserviceable craft at the Basra FOB. As with all operations conducted on the Shatt Al Arab waterway it was conducted under the auspices of Ref F. The plan was for the UQ RNTT Det comprising 2 x Combat Support Boats (CSB) and 1 x Boston Whaler (BW) to RV mid channel in the vicinity of Al Faw at GR 39RTP 570190 with 2 x BWs from the AAF FOB. Once at the RV the boats were to refuel and having exchanged the CSB, return to their respective FOBs. The complete task was due to last 9 hours.

WHAT HAPPENED?

- 4. A full chronology of events is included at Annex A. On the 20 Jun 04 the RNTT Ops Offr conducted a telephone brief for those personnel due to take part in the task the following day. As stated, the purpose of the task was to replace an unserviceable craft in the BASRA FOB with a serviceable one from UQ. At 210430D Jun 04 the UQ RNTT Det comprising 8 men, 2 x CSB and 1 x BW departed for the RV.
- 5. At approximately, 210545D Jun 04 the UQ RNTT Det experienced problems whilst transiting the Khawr Abd Allah, in that the lead CSB began to develop mechanical difficulties. It was diagnosed as an overheating engine and so it was decided to allow the engine to cool before trying to restart. After the engine had cooled sufficiently to restart At

210730D Jun 04 the RNTT Det were able to continue on their way to the Al Faw and their RV.

- 6. Realising that they were now going to be late for the RV with the AAF Det the party attempted to radio ahead to contact them. Despite hearing other radio traffic they failed in establishing communications on VHF Channel 16 with the AAF Det. Unbeknownst to them the AAF Det had also encountered mechanical problems and had been forced to return home. At 210815D Jun 04 the UQ RNTT Det assessed their position to be 39RTP 690007. Although they had been unsuccessful in establishing communications they headed North West along the border of Marakkat Abd Allah and Shaat Al Arab channel using echo sounder to follow the 2 metre contour line, thereby ensuring that they stayed within Iraqi waters. Additionally, they maintained visual contact with the navigational marker buoys keeping to the West of the channel, whilst concurrently running a GPS Waypoint in vicinity of the Inner Bar.
- 7. In the approximate area of 39RTP 746093 the UQ RNTT Det observed an unidentified civilian speed boat behaving suspiciously by making close passes to and stopping vessels using the main channel. As part of routine counter smuggling operations the RNTT routinely intercepts and investigates boats acting suspiciously. At 210920D Jun 04 in accordance with standard operating procedures the UQ RNTT Det detached the BW to investigate the speed boat that was acting suspiciously, leaving the CSBs to provide cover. In doing so it entered the Shaat Al Arab navigable channel, remaining at all times within Iraqi territorial waters. The BW drew level with the speed boat the detail. There was only one occupant who was wearing loose pyjama type clothing and who appeared to be unarmed. They judged it not to be a threat and so took no further action other than to exchange greetings.
- 8. It now became apparent to the BW that there were two additional civilian 'Scarab' fast boats in the area operating just inside Iranian waters, one blue one yellow, which appeared to be

moving between Dhows speaking to their crews, before turning to come alongside the BW and shadow them. The Scarabs had a crew of 3, were again dressed in civilian clothes and appeared to be unarmed. The BW saw no identifiable threat from these Scarabs and so returned to the CSB group, which had continued on a NW course running parallel to the Shatt Al Arab navigable channel thereby remaining inside Iraqi territorial waters. The UQ RNTT Det had also noticed an Iranian gunboat tied up to a pillar on the Iranian side of the border at 39R TP711122.

- 8. At approximately 210935D Jun 04 the RNTT UQ Det detected what they believed to be the boats from the AAF RNTT Det, closing in on their starboard bow at high speed from the centre of the channel, approximately 39R TP 700135. It was not until the boats came closer that they were positively identified as two Iranian gunboats, crewed by approximately 7 men all of which were armed. At the same time the 2 x gunboats were also joined by the two civilian blue and yellow Scarab fast boats seen earlier, whose occupants were now clearly armed. As a consequence of that initial misidentification the UQ RNTT Det were effectively cut-off from the front by the Iranian gunboats and from the rear by the Scarabs, they were now effectively surrounded. Annex B shows the positioning of the Iranian boats in relation to the UK CF boats.
- 9. Believing that they had done nothing wrong, the RNTT crew indicated to the Iranian boats now surrounding them of their position in Iraqi territorial waters by holding up their charts¹. The Iranian response was to make their weapons ready which included a 0.5 inch heavy machine gun. At this point the UQ RNTT Det was forced over the Iranian border and made to tie up alongside a pontoon at GR 39R TP 704132. Throughout this ordeal the UQ RNTT Det were adamant that they had not strayed into Iranian territorial waters until forced to do so by the Iranian gunboats. What followed was a period of interrogation and detention by the Iranians, details of which are contained in the J2 report at Ref D and E. The team were released to Foreign Office Diplomats on 24 June 2004 prior to their return to Iraq on 25 June 2004.

EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING

- 10. All RNTT personnel undertake theatre OPTAG training, prior to arrival in Iraq. Additionally they are qualified in Board & Search techniques and all boat coxswains are either qualified RM Landing Craftsmen or RN Sea-boat Coxswains. Standard operating procedures, which were complied with, require a minimum of 2 personnel in each boat one of which must be a coxswain and one of which a crewman. The additional personnel involved were being transferred between FOBs for administrative purposes. A list of personnel who were detained is at Annex C.
- 11. The boats operated by the UQ RNTT Det were 2 x Mil Combat Support Boats (CSBs) and 1 x Boston Whaler (BW). The BW is fitted with Navigational Radar and all craft were fitted with echo sounders and compasses. Whilst the BW's fitted GPS was unserviceable each craft had 2 handheld GPS. Each boat had a maritime fit VHF radio. The RNTT personnel were released with their personal equipment only. The boats, weapons and other equipment have been retained by the Iranians, a summary of which appears as Annex D.

WHY

12. Why is probably the harder of the questions to answer. The pattern of activity over the twelve months that the RNTT has been in theatre has seen occasions when Iranian border guards have fired warning shots towards routine training patrols; however nothing in Iran's behaviour previously could have fore-warned of this type of incident and reaction.

¹ Chart used believed to be No 3842 Edn 2 dated 28 Nov 02.

- 13. The border between Iran and Iraq is laid down in the Algiers Agreement 1975 as the median line of the Deep Water Channel. Disagreements over the shifting boundary have been frequent and were one of the triggers which sparked the Iran/Iraq war of the 1980s. Sensitivity over the border is well known and as such RNTT personnel are regularly briefed when operating on the Shat Al Arab waterway. However, the crew that day had a difficult decision to make when faced with a potential threat in the form of a boat acting suspiciously, not least because it is highly likely that after the suicide attack on the 24 Apr 04 on the KAAOT and ABOT² at least one of the boats escaped using Iranian waters. Thus the RNTT knew that terrorists have used the cover of the border before. Whilst with hindsight operating within 150m of the international border might have been construed as imprudent it was not considered provocative because only one of the three RNTT craft approached the suspicious fast boat in the vicinity of the deep water channel. Not to have done so would have been to ignore a potential threat. Ironically the RN/RM were proved correct, but thought the threat was either from smugglers or terrorists, not Iranians.
- 14. Additionally, crews are instructed to de-escalate and avoid any confrontational situation with Iranian forces and thus avoid doing anything that could be construed as a hostile act. Once the Iranian boats appeared, realising they were out gunned and with no opportunity to manoeuvre the crew became fully compliant to de-escalate the situation they found themselves in. The Iranians for their part may have reacted to events recently on the political scene and sought to make wider capital by intercepting UK Mil personnel. It is emphasised that the RNTT Det did not enter into Iranian territorial waters until forced to do so. However a study of the charts will show that it would not be entirely unreasonable for the Iranians, who were not likely to be equipped with GPS, to have concluded that when the single RNTT craft approached the first Scarab that it had actually crossed the border

 That said, this vessel was definitely in Iraqi waters. The activities of the Scarab could be construed a 'come on' for which the RNTT fell. More likely the Scarabs were part of an Iranian operation conducting surveillance against our forces or those of smugglers. It might be thought that the RNTT craft got too close to the border from their perspective.

LESSON LEARNT

- 15. The main lessons to be learnt from this incident are as follows:
 - a. <u>Communications Equipment</u>. The inadequacies of the commercial communication solution operated in Iraq have been documented at Ref G and are well known to the chain of command. The fall back position has been to rely on military VHF/HF communications which are in themselves inherently unreliable as it operates on the Clansman bearer system. In the situation faced by the RNTT their means of communication was the maritime VHF channel 16 facility which is range limited. An operational FOB at Al Faw would have ensured VHF connectivity at all times, one is planned and is due to be operational by the end of August. The RNTT Det were unable to report their late progress or the fact that they had been captured, this capability gap had already been identified and an SOR placed for Iridium phones. At the time of the incident these phones had been purchased but not yet issued, this situation is now resolved and one Iridium phone is now carried by each patrol.
 - b. <u>Maps and Charts</u>. The accuracy of mapping and charting of disputed international borders is always likely to prove to be difficult. The Admiralty chart warns mariners that

² On 24 Apr 04 the offshore Khor Al Amaya Oil Terminal (KAAOT) and the Al Basra Oil Terminal (ABOT) were subject to a suicide attacked by up to 2 x civilian fast boats with one escaping. A successful attack on these strategic instillations would have environmental and financial global impact.

"the current position of the international boundary cannot be precisely given, however a closer approximation to it is probably the median line of the 2000 survey whose limits are shown as pecked lines on the chart." In future operating procedures will be reviewed and if necessary adjusted to prevent CF personnel operating within a prescribed buffer zone of any international border, unless required to do to in saving life or limb.

- c. Radar Station and Coverage. Ref H was a paper produced by FLEET OLRT for PJHQ and MND (SE) that sought to provide a recognised maritime picture for the 2 x FOBs at Umm Qasr and Al Faw in order to cover either end of the two main waterborne points of access into Iraq; the Khawr Abd Allah and Shatt Al Arab. Despite staffing the requirement in Apr 04 funding from MNC I has still not been released, a decision is expected in early Jul 04. It has been identified that coastal and riverine radar surveillance in the southern reaches of Iraq is a critical capability gap necessary to provide a maritime picture, situational awareness and effective border security. As well as the radar sites the FOBs would also have provided VHF nodes to improve local comms. Having this capability providing full maritime situational awareness would contribute to the deterrence of border incursions and smugglers as well as deterring and disrupting the threat posed by suicide fast boats on the strategic oil installations. Maritime situational awareness of the approaches to this area would aid law enforcement and provide the ability to record accurately events and incidents similar to those of 21 Jun 04. This capability could be delivered for less than \$400,000.
- d. Al Faw Forward Operating Base. The Al Faw is the biggest fishing port on the Shatt Al Arab waterway and has strategic importance as one of only two waterborne gateways to Iraq. The purpose of establishing a FOB on the Al Faw peninsular is to provide a secure site in which to further expand the Iraq Riverine Patrol Service (IRPS) operations and capability. Had a FOB existed at the time of this incident it could have been used as sanctuary in the event of mechanical breakdown, a relay station for VHF connectivity and a secure site to house a permanent radar site location. Establishing the Al Faw FOB has been the subject of a Statement of Requirement (SOR) since May 04, funding is expected to be to be released soon, allowing contracts to be let and work to begin in early August 04.
- e. <u>Diplomatic Relations and Force Profile</u>. Following Transfer of Sovereignty (TOA) it is essential that all patrols are now led by Iraqis. They may request RNTT assistance for the immediate future, but the team's role is now supporting an Iraqi lead. Training and mentoring will continue. Nonetheless the profile of patrols is a matter for Iraq. Iraq will begin to establish Diplomatic ties with Tehran and have decided to pursue the recovery of their craft. Contact has already been made by Brigadier Ali of the Directorate of Border Enforcement with his counterpart in Khorramshahr.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO PREVENT A RECURRENCE

16. This incident has provided a catalyst to further review all aspects of operations in the Southern reaches of SAA. The RNTT's actions were entirely within Standard Operating Instructions (SOIs) in pursuit of an authorised mission inside Iraqi territorial waters. Procedures were followed correctly and interpreted in accordance with the current threat levels. The recommendations from this incident are summarised below:

- a. 1 Mech Bde will complete the process of reviewing Standard Operating Instructions (SOIs) in respect of maritime operations. Following TOA the conduct of patrols will be in accordance with Iraqi intent.
- b. The Al Faw FOB must be established as a matter of urgency thereby providing a capability to Iraqi Law enforcement operations on this strategic waterway and a VHF communications node for CF and ISF operations.
- c. MND SE may wish to expedite the release of funds for the procurement of Radar Station for Al Faw and Umm Qasr, thereby providing a recognised maritime picture and recorded data of incidents.
- d. 1 Mech Bde will review all operations around and near to any international border. If necessary establish a safety margin of 200m for CF personnel unless there is an identifiable threat or immediate risk to life, otherwise entry into the buffer zone should be prohibited. All mentored border activities should be reviewed in order to avoid provocation of Iranian authorities.
- e. CF to mentor ISF to implement an effective policy of diplomatic and local engagement with recognised Iranian Authorities, through the Foreign Ministry and Directorate of Border Enforcement (DBE) which should provide a local mechanism for discussing border management issues.
- f. If it were considered to be appropriate for crews are to adopt a more aggressive response to future Iranian incursions the RNTT boats will need to be better armed. This would be essential to make resistance in similar circumstances credible. It is recommended as a minimum that all boats are armed with 2 x Minimi or GPMGs.

SUMMARY

17. It is the Comd's view that the action the BW crew took to investigate the suspicious activity of the civilian fast boat was likely to have been misconstrued by the Iranians as a border incursion. Given the disputed nature of the border, one can surmise that the Iranians therefore decided to conduct an arrest operation based on their perception of our actions. There are 2 options. Firstly to adopt a more aggressive profile with a more aggressive force posture; or secondly to de-escalate potential tension imposing restrictions such as buffer zones, placing the emphasis on an Iraqi solution through the medium of dialogue and local engagement. Given TOA and the relative preparedness of the ISF it is not credible that they could adopt a more aggressive posture, nor given our current ORBAT could the Bde. The latter approach would therefore seem entirely appropriate with UK CF acting in support of ISF.

{Original Signed}

DCOS 1 Mech Bde

Maj

Annexes:

- A. Chronology of Events of the 21 Jun 04.
- B. Positioning of the Iranian Boats.

- C. List of Detained PersonnelD. List of Lost Equipment.
- Distribution:

External:

Action:

HQ MND (SE) – for COS SO1 J1 UK NSE CMATT

Internal:

Action:

COS

OC RNTT

ANNEX A TO 1 MECH DCOS/G1/02 DATED 29 JUN 04

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1. The following outline of events is a summary of the initial deployment and subsequent arrest of the RNTT party by Iranian authorities.

Ser	DTG	Event	Remarks
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
1.	210430D	Party departed Umm Qasr North Port heading toward RV at Al Faw 39RTP 570190.	
2.	210545D	Party encountered engine problems during transit of Khawr Abd Allah with lead Combat Support Boat (CSB) starboard engine. Problem identified as overheating.	
3.	210730D	Party continues Journey to Al Paw. Realising that party would be late for RV with Basra patrol, party attempted to call on VHF channel 16, at 210815D. Approx location at this stage 39RTP 690007. Patrol was unable to establish comms with Basra patrol but could hear USS Leyte Gulf and HMAS Stuart in North Arabian Gulf.	
4.	210900D	Party turned north west towards Shaat Al Arab channel running up the 2 metre contour line on Iraqi side of channel using echo sounders to follow depth. Party estimated that they were at least 500 metres inside Iraqi territorial waters. Party was visual with navigational marks on channel throughout.	
5.	210920D	Party observed an unidentified speed boat behaving suspiciously in area of 39RTP 746093 The crew of the speed boat were dressed in civilian clothes. No weapons were observed. The Boston Whaler went over to investigate and entered navigable channel of Shaat Al Arab remaining within Iraqi territorial waters. As Boston Whaler entered the navigable channel the crew identified 2 additional high performance speed boats. The speed boats appeared to be moving between Dhows pulling up beside them and speaking to the Dhow crews.	
6.	210925D	The Boston Whaler rejoined the 2 x CSBs to continue north west. At this stage the RNTT party noticed an Iranian gun boat tied up to a pillar at 39RTP711122.	
7.	210930D	RNTT patrol continues north west up 2 metre contour	

Ser	DTG	Event	Remarks
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
		line towards mouth of Shaat Al Arab.	
8.	210935D	RNTT patrol gained visual of 2 x speed boats closing on	
		starboard bow at speed which they initially thought to	
		be the Basra patrol moving to RV with them.	
9.	210940D	RNTT patrol identified crew of 7 personnel in one of	
		speed boats who were armed with small arms.	
10.	210945D	While still proceeding north west up the 2 metre contour	
		line inside Iraqi territorial waters the RNTT patrol of 3	
		boats was intercepted by 4 speed boats from north and	
		south-east. Lead RNTT boat indicated visually that they	
		were still inside Iraqi territorial waters by holding up a	a a
		chart and pointing to their position and making clear	,
		that their intention was to carry on moving north west	
	7	into the Shaat Al Arab. It is believed the chart used was	
		Chart Number 3842 Edn 2 dated 28 Nov 2002. At this	
		point armed men in the speed boats made their weapons	
		ready. At this stage armed personnel in speed boats	
		indicated to RNTT patrol to enter Iranian waters forcing	
		them to alter course 45 degrees to starboard.	
11.	210955D	RNTT party of 3 boats tied up alongside pontoon at	
	, ,	39RTP704132 on Iranian side of Shaat Al Arab.	
12.	21100D	RNTT personnel had weapons confiscated and were	
		given rudimentary body search and blindfolded.	

ANNEX C TO 1MECH DCOS /G1/02 DATED 29 JUN 04

LIST OF DETAINED PERSONNEL

Conicl	NI	D 1/D			
Serial	Name	Rank/Rate	Service	Service	Remarks
				Number	
(a)	(b)	(c)	_(d)	(e)	(f)
1.					Umm Qasr Det
					Cdr
2.					Outgoing UQ
					Det Cdr
3.		and the same of			Section Cdr
4.					
5.	The same of the last of the last]			
6.					
7.					
8.					,

ANNEX D TO 1 MECH DCOS/G1/02 DATED 29 JUN O4

LIST OF LOST EQUIPMENT HELD BY THE IRANIANS

<u>ITEM</u>	SOURCE / NUMBER
Combat Support Boat	TD50AA (CSB0010)
Combat Support Boat	TD68AA (CSB0028)
Life Raft	4 (CSB issue)
Boston Whaler	IRPS
Minimi LMG	Theatre issue – FN068772
minimi rounds	Theatre issue x 395
5.56mm Rifle	HMS Nelson – A200748
5.56mm Rifle	HMS Nelson – A311439
5.56mm Rifle	FPGRM -A325496
5.56mm Rifle	FPGRM - A326004
5.56mm Rifle	FPGRM - A330585
5.56mm Rifle	FPGRM – A333817
SUSAT Sight	RM-POOLE
SUSAT Sight	Theatre issue – 058910
SUSAT Sight	FPGRM – 116265
SUSAT Sight	FPGRM - 039901
SUSAT Sight	FPGRM - 117649
SUSAT Sight	FPGRM - 073981
24 x 5.56 Rifle Magazines	8 x HMS Nelson / 16 x FPGRM
5.56 Rounds	Theatre issue x 600
Browning 9mm Pistol	HMS Nelson – <u>A17767</u>
Browning 9mm Pistol	FPGRM – A04307
4 x Browning magazines	2 x HMS Nelson / 2 x FPGRM
Browning 9mm rounds	Theatre issue x 40
Glock 9mm Pistol	FWS676_
Glock 9mm Pistol	FWS466
Glock 9mm Pistol	FWS468
Glock magazine	Theatre issue x 9
Glock 9mm rounds	Theatre issue x 135
5 x Black Hawk Pistol Holder	FPGRM
Personal Role Radio	FPGRM
Personal Role Radio	FPGRM
Personal Role Radio	Theatre issue - S13703701
Personal Role Radio	Theatre issue - S13620001
Personal Role Radio	Theatre issue - S13701001
Personal Role Radio	Theatre issue - S13619601
PRESSEL PRR	Theatre issue - 7133701
PRESSEL PRR	Theatre issue - 7133901
HEADSET PRR	Theatre issue - 6700901

HEADSET PRR	Theatre issue - 6702901
MIC ADAPTOR PRR	Theatre issue x 4
DPM POUCH PRR	Theatre issue x 4
INSTRUCTION CARDS PRR	Theatre issue x 8
1 x GPS	FPGRM (Cpl Monan)
7 x Sets Webbing	5 x FPGRM / 2 x HMS Nelson / 1 x Poole
CS 95 Day sack	FPGRM x 3
Black Issue Day sack	HMS Nelson x 5
8 x ECBA	3 x FPGRM / 5 x Theatre issue
Morphine	Theatre issue x 8
1 x Issue Mobile Phone	
NVG	Theatre issue - 9351
NVG	Theatre issue - 8884
NVG	FPGRM
SF Mark 3 Life Jacket	0328589
SF Mark 3 Life Jacket	0328598
SF Mark 3 Life Jacket	0328619
SF Mark 3 Life Jacket	0328546
LCLJ Life Jacket	0330200
Life Jackets	FPGRM x 3
sets mini flares	Theatre Issue x 10
Paralume	Theatre Issue x 10