

Written evidence submitted by James Cowan MBE (CHA0056)

THE DOVER PATROL

1. In December 2018 the former British Home Secretary, Sajid Javid declared a 'major incident' following a significant rise in the number of migrants entering the UK, from France, by crossing the English Channel in small, often overloaded, inflatable boats powered by an outboard engine. The official figure for the number of migrants who made the crossing in 2018 is 299, although others believe that the true total may have been in excess of 500. This new route for entering the UK illegally, by crossing the English Channel in a small boat, is, most probably, the result of enhanced security at the Channel ports of Calais and Dunkirk where migrants would secrete themselves in lorries boarding ferries bound for the UK, or board those lorries driving onto the trains passing through the Channel Tunnel.

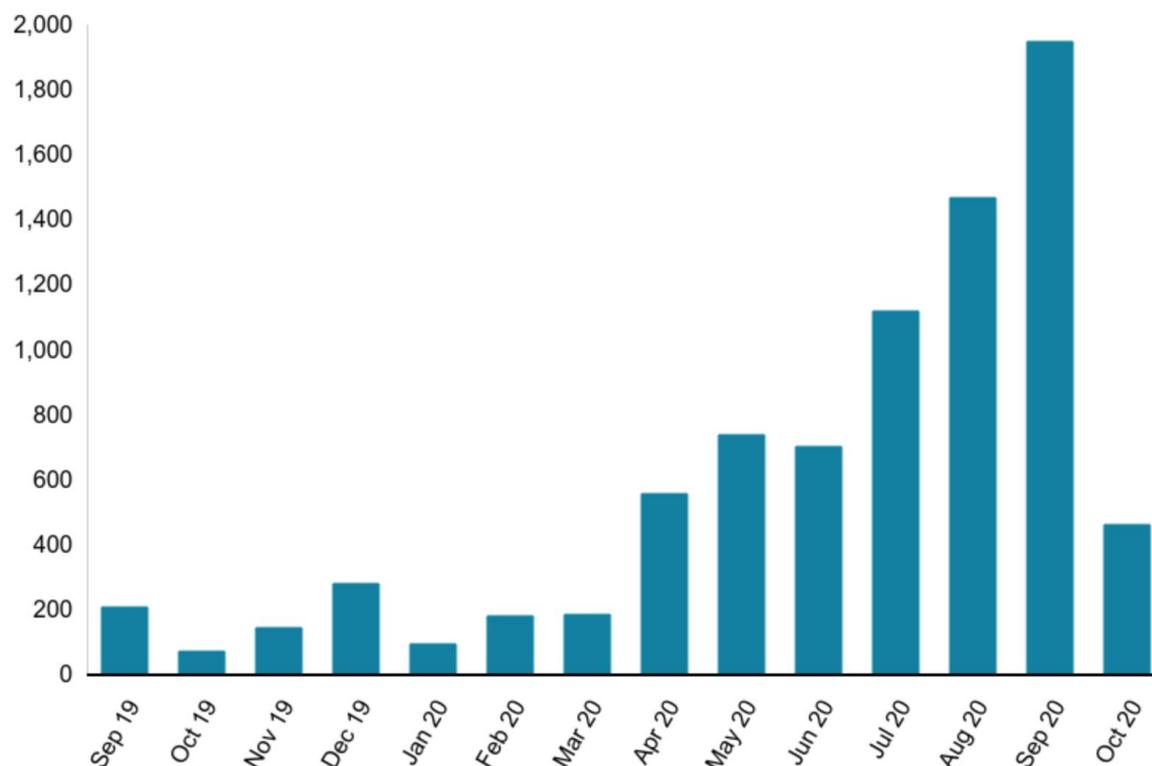
Since 2018 there has been a significant rise in the number of migrants crossing the English Channel in small, often overloaded inflatable boats.

2. Despite the best efforts of the UK Border Force, supported by Her Majesty's Coastguard and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, in 2019 the number of migrants arriving in the UK in small boats increased to 1,840. The new Home Secretary, Ms Priti Patel, who was appointed in July 2019, has, on many occasions, expressed a determination to stop migrants risking their lives and the lives of their children by making the very dangerous cross-Channel route unviable. In August 2020 she appointed Mr Dan O'Mahoney, a career civil servant and former Royal Marine, to the new position of Clandestine Channel Threat Commander to coordinate the UK response in cooperation with the French authorities.

3. Nevertheless, throughout 2020 the numbers of migrants crossing the English Channel have increased month on month, apart from a small dip in June. The September total of 1,963 migrants exceeded the total for the whole of 2019 and the annual total of over 8,000, in mid-November 2020, is over four times the total for the previous year! Moreover, the total of 462 in October exceeds the official total for the whole of 2018. Several migrants are known to have lost their lives. On the 27 October 2020 a migrant boat capsized near Dunkirk with the loss of 4 lives, a man, a woman and 2 children aged 6 and 9 years; a 15 month old infant, a member of the same family, together with another 2 adults were reported as missing. Out of a total of 22 there were 15 survivors. This brings the total number of lives reported to have been lost in recent months to 10. In the first 16 days of November a further 563 migrants were rescued and detained.

Channel crossings by migrants in small boats

Number of people reaching the UK each month since September 2019



Figures include migrants intercepted in the English Channel or detained by Border Force after reaching the UK

Source: Home Office/BBC research



The number of migrants crossing the English Channel in small boats has increased month on month throughout 2020. Almost 2,000 arrived in September. By mid-November the annual total had increased to over 8,000.

THE UNITED KINGDOM'S MAIN LINE OF DEFENCE

4. At sea the main line of defence, to protect the UK against illegal immigration and illegal imports, is the Border Force. In the English Channel there are two cutters, HMC Seeker and HMC Vigilant based at Dover and Ramsgate, together with three smaller coastal patrol vessels. These Border Force vessels are supported by the lifeboats of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, in particular the lifeboats based at Dover and at Ramsgate. Coordination, for what has become the UK's longest running peacetime search and rescue operation, is, to say the least, complicated. In addition to the joint Anglo-French Intelligence Centre at Calais and the Coastguard Operations Centre at Dover there are three other intelligence centres in the UK: the Border Force National Maritime Intelligence Bureau, the Joint Maritime Coordination Centre and the National Maritime Information Centre, all at Portsmouth.

HMC Seeker, one of two UK Border Force cutters based at Dover to patrol the English Channel to intercept migrants attempting to enter the UK in small boats.

AIR SUPPORT

5. Although the distance between France and the UK is not much more than 21 miles, between Calais and Dover, the sea area in a box with Dungeness, Ramsgate, Dunkirk and Boulogne-sur-Mer at each corner is some 1,700 square miles, a very large area when searching for a small boat, particularly at night and in poor visibility. Air support with the proverbial 'eye in the sky' provides the crew of a surface vessel with an enormous advantage. In this respect the UK government is to be applauded for the number and range of aircraft that have been tasked to provide the Border Force, together the lifeboats of the RNLI, with air support. The aircraft, to patrol the English Channel when the weather favours a crossing in a small boat, often large numbers of boats, are provided by the Ministry of Defence and HM Coastguard.

6. Those aircraft provided by the MoD include the Boeing P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, the Airbus A400M Atlas transport aircraft and the Beechcraft Shadow R1 surveillance aircraft, all flown by the RAF, together with the Thales Watchkeeper unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) which is flown by the British Army. Of these four, quite different aircraft the P-8 Poseidon is, without doubt, the most capable, but with a quoted operating cost of £35,000 per flying hour it can be likened to using a hammer to crack a walnut and, moreover, it's a very expensive hammer! The deployment of a very large transport aircraft, the Airbus A400M Atlas, to carry a pair of binoculars to conduct a visual search of the Channel for boats carrying migrants simply beggars belief!

Using the large Airbus A400M Atlas transport aircraft to conduct a visual search for boats carrying migrants, with a pair of binoculars, simply beggars belief!

7. Of the three manned aircraft, the Shadow R1 with its X-band surveillance radar and Wescam MX-15 electro-optical camera turret is probably the most suitable for the role, although it's still a hammer being used to crack a walnut, albeit a somewhat less expensive hammer than the Boeing P-8 Poseidon sub-hunter.

Of the three manned aircraft deployed by the RAF to support the UK Border Force the Shadow R1 is most suited to the role of searching for small boats carrying migrants across the English Channel.

8. In addition to those aircraft that may be seconded by the Ministry of Defence to the Home Office, to provide 'Military Assistance to the Civilian Authority', to support the Border Force with aerial surveillance, HM Coastguard also has a small fleet of fixed-wing aircraft for search and rescue duties based centrally at Doncaster. These aircraft, two Beechcraft King Air's and a Piper Navajo which, like the RAF Shadow R1 have radar and an electro-optical camera turret, fly regular patrols of the English Channel

Her Majesty's Coastguard has two King Air's and a Piper Navajo, closest to the camera, based centrally at Doncaster for search and rescue duties.

9. Also, as well as using manned aircraft to direct surface vessels to those migrants who have willingly placed themselves in danger and now need 'rescuing', the ongoing operation in the English Channel has proved to be an excellent opportunity to test the utility of two fixed-wing unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly called drones. On the UK side of the median line, half-way between England and France, the Border Force is supported by the Royal Artillery with a Thales Watchkeeper

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and a civil contractor also provides support with a Tekever AR5 drone, registration G-TEKV. Both aircraft are flown from Lydd from where the latter drone, the AR5 makes regular patrols of up to 6 hours, spotting small boats containing migrants and reporting their positions to a control room located at Lydd.

10. A typical day, in good weather, will see the RAF Shadow R1 arriving on task, over the Channel at around 01:00 hrs to fly a barrier patrol for some 4 hours. This aircraft will be relieved by one of the Coastguard aircraft, to continue the patrol, before being relieved by the Tekever AR5 drone. In the meantime up to four UK Border Force cutters and patrol boats will be at sea, together with three RNLI lifeboats.

The Border Force is supported by two drones which are flown from Lydd airfield near Dungeness. The Thales Watchkeeper, on the left, and the Tekever AR5.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

11. All multi-agency operations require command and control (C2) and the ongoing operation in the English Channel is no exception. However, for two years, since 2018, the principal control has been the weather; migrants cross the Channel when an anti-cyclone (high pressure) is in charge of the weather with light winds and calm seas. Command comes from the criminal gangs who arrange the sailings with, according to a recent ITV investigation, payment made to an intermediary in London. The payment of thousands of pounds is held in an account in the UK until the journey has been completed, giving the whole operation an impression of legitimacy.

12. After two years of illegal immigration with numbers increasing, year on year, the current UK strategy with ships at sea and aircraft in the air, all on the UK side of the median line, has proved to be futile! On one day in September, 394 migrants in 26 boats completed a successful crossing after being 'rescued' by the Border Force. Moreover, although there have been many reports of the French being complicit, permitting the migrants to leave the beaches of northern France, between Dunkirk and Boulogne-sur-Mer, this isn't always true. In one weekend in October there was a report of 550 migrants being detained by the French whilst a further 220 were 'rescued' by the UK Border Force and the RNLI on the same day.

A NEW STRATEGY

13. The significant increase in the number of migrants entering the UK across the English Channel brings into question the current UK strategy of 'rescuing' the migrants at sea. If this highly dangerous route is to be closed down, then a new strategy will be required in 2021, after the anticipated winter weather respite. Many will agree that the answer lies on the beaches of northern France and not in the middle of one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. In a recent report the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, David Bolt stated, ***'The key to tackling the small boat threat is prevention: stopping the boats from setting off from the beaches and ports in northern France.'*** The report also highlights the fact that, unlike larger vessels, the small boats used by the migrants do not carry transponders and are too small to register on radar.

14. A further piece of advice is, *'Don't reinvent the wheel. Better to 'steal' someone else's wheel and paint it in your own colours'*! In this case, part of the answer, that part that involves the provision of air support, may be found on the other side of the Atlantic, in the USA. Formed in 1941, to mobilise the nation's civilian aviation resources, the US Civil Air Patrol, now an auxiliary of the US Air Force, has a fleet of 550 light aircraft, mostly Cessna 172's and 182's, flown by volunteers. These aircraft, together with their volunteer crews, account for some 80% of all overland search and rescue

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missions on behalf of the USAF, as well as responding to major incidents in support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). A complimentary organisation, also in the USA, is the US Coast Guard Auxiliary (Air) which recruits volunteers, those with their own light aircraft, to fly Coast Guard and Homeland Security missions, on the coast and offshore between Florida and Cuba.

The US Civil Air Patrol has a fleet of 550 light aircraft, mostly Cessna 172's and 182's flown by volunteers for SAR missions and to support the Federal Emergency Management Agency with aerial reconnaissance during national emergencies.

15. Compared to the deployment, by the 'high tech' aircraft such as the P-8 Poseidon and Shadow R1, together with those aircraft belonging to HM Coastguard, the alternative, a 'low tech' light observation aircraft will require some lateral thinking by the Clandestine Channel Threat Commander and his colleagues! Nevertheless, with the cooperation of the French Police Aux Frontieres, who already fly occasional coastal patrols with a Cessna 172 Skyhawk, a joint operation to patrol the beaches of northern France, between Dunkirk and Boulogne-sur-Mer, should prove to be just as effective as those similar patrols that take place in the USA. Patrols that are flown by the volunteers of the US Civil Air Patrol and the US Coast Guard Auxiliary (Air).

16. The strategy would be one of 'deter and detect' with overt air patrols. These patrols would deter those migrants who are gathering on secluded beaches whilst, at the same time, detecting those who are seen to be deploying inflatable boats. The light observation aircraft, flown by volunteers, would patrol during daylight hours, most probably using the same binoculars carried by the A400M Atlas transport aircraft! Drones, for example the Tekever AR5 with its thermal imager, would continue the patrol at night. This combination of a light observation aircraft flying during daylight hours, together with drone for night operations, would be extremely cost effective compared to the current multi-million pound strategy, a strategy which is known to have failed. Moreover, the airborne response would be proportional to the threat and 'persistent' patrolling would remain within budget.

17. If the proposed joint Anglo-French operation, with volunteers flying light observation aircraft, proved to be a success then, sensibly, the UK government would be persuaded to form its own HM Coastguard Auxiliary (Air). To join the 3,500 volunteers of the Coastguard Rescue Service, together with the 5,600 volunteer crew members of the RNLI lifeboats, to patrol the UK's 11,000 miles of coastline. This initiative that should be promoted at the earliest opportunity, many experienced general aviation pilots will agree. The same pilots who have the right skills, who fly the right aircraft and who wish to support the government and their local communities as a volunteer, as an airborne auxiliary coastguard officer.

James A Cowan MBE BA CF FRIN

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Note:

The author is a former RAF Nimrod captain who, with Crew 7, No 201 Squadron, flew the longest operational maritime patrol sortie of over 19 hours during the Falklands conflict. He was also the leader of RAF 'Exercise Northern Venture' which completed a circumnavigation of the Northern Hemisphere with two DHC1 Chipmunk light training aircraft, flying across Europe, Russia, North America and the North Atlantic, before returning to the UK. After retiring from the RAF he was employed as a police pilot with the North East Air Support Unit and also as an air ambulance pilot

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with the Scottish Air Ambulance Service, flying the ubiquitous BN Islander transport aircraft. Before joining the RAF he was a member of the crew of the RNLi inshore lifeboat at Hartlepool. He is also a qualified sport parachute pilot and holds an RYA Certificate of Competence as a Yachtmaster Offshore. Between 2009 and 2017 he was chairman of the UK Civil Air Patrol which encourages the owners of private aircraft to support the emergency services, including the NHS, together with their local communities, with air transport, air to ground photography and air search.