

24 Jul 15

Regional Commandant Wales and West

Investigation in to the circumstances of the cancellation of an expedition to Gibraltar

Rationale behind the investigation

1. In early Jul 15 a planned AT expedition was cancelled with only days to go before the departure of the staff and cadets scheduled for 06 Jul 15. The deposit for the airfares (£1075) had been forfeited and there may yet be more claims against the ACO though none have occurred to date. The disappointment to staff and cadets resulting from this is understandable but there is also the effect on the ACO's reputation. Some parents had arranged activities for while their children were away and we were undoubtedly seen in a poor light. Places at other camps were found for some cadets in short order and I believe that efforts are continuing in this matter.

2. I have no experience in the organization of an overseas AT expedition or the regulations that govern them. Any observations or recommendations that I make are based on my experience in the management of a number of projects and I ask should be taken as such. I have collated approximately 200 pages of statements and emails (many of them double sided) but it is not my intention to try and second guess each decision as it was made but, in line with my TORs, it my intention to attempt to ascertain:

- The cause of the cancellation.
- What, if any remedial measures could have been put in place to avoid cancellation.
- Whether the planning of the expedition complied with ACO regulations and with best practice. In particular I intend to look at:
 - Accommodation.
 - Planned activities.

Background

3. In Autumn 2014 [REDACTED] requested permission to organise a SCUBA AT expedition to Gibraltar in the summer of 2015 seeking to make use of accommodation, messing and resources in support, such as MT and medical - available locally through Service sources. SCUBA training would be provided by local approved and professionally qualified commercial trainers. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The 2015 expedition was primarily for cadets from [REDACTED] sqn 2475 (Ammanford) Sqn then 293 (Cowbridge) Sqn, 334 (Neath) Sqn, 1054 (Llanelli) Sqn with supplements from 215 (Swansea) Sqn and [REDACTED] (Llwchwr) Sqn [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Additional cadets were invited from 1 Welsh Wing 275 (Blaina and Nantyglo) Sqn; in total some 43 persons (37 cadets / 6 staff) were planned to go.

4. As the Sqn Committee was new and incomplete there was no treasurer or account held. Necessary payments were made by [REDACTED] from the welfare account the Sqn money being ring fenced. The WExO had made the initial booking and paid the deposit for the seats carrying out the function of a treasurer at the request of [REDACTED] who had discussed with [REDACTED] ways of paying, including transfers of money to [REDACTED] account and [REDACTED] writing a cheque.

Cause of the cancellation

5. The camp was cancelled due to the loss of the original aircraft seat booking due to a deadline to pay the balance being missed by 5 weeks. Monarch, who had the booking, would reinstate the seats for an additional £4000 and this was thought to be too high a cost. Other options were looked at but none suitable were found within the next couple of days and the decision was made to cancel the camp in its entirety. Since then there have been comments from certain areas that the money could have been made available – but at the time a decision had to be made.

6. From the outset, in my opinion, a casual attitude was taken to the payment of the balance of the air fare by those involved. The deadline given by the airline was 25 May – made clear at the time of booking, but no effort to pay by this date was made and money to cover this cost was not deposited until a significant period after the deadline. The booking could have been lost 5 weeks earlier than it was due to inaction. On 08 Jun, 2 weeks after the deadline a reminder was received by [REDACTED] which was forwarded on to [REDACTED] in turn asked the [REDACTED] pay the balance and was informed that [REDACTED] would if an invoice was produced and sufficient funds had been deposited into the welfare account.

7. A total of £8520 was paid in by 23 Jun and £12670 was paid into the account by the end of the month (the balance to pay was £8059.06) and, with possible justification, [REDACTED] thought that he had done all [REDACTED] needed to do. [REDACTED] had asked [REDACTED] 'treasurer' to pay the bill and made enough deposits to cover the cost; however, it would have been prudent to inform the [REDACTED] that the money had been deposited and ensure that the bill was paid, particularly in light of the fact that it was well overdue. The [REDACTED] stated that [REDACTED] did not pay the bill as no phone call was received confirming that the money had been deposited. A further and final reminder was received on 29 Jun (5 weeks after the official deadline) but was not read until 30 Jun by which time the flights had been cancelled. [REDACTED] attempted to make payment immediately the email was read but Monarch would not take the payment without the £4000 surcharge.

Accommodation

8. The initial intended dates for the camp were changed due to lack of availability of Service accommodation and even after a change it was decided to use civilian accommodation 15 minutes walk from the Junior Ranks Mess where they would be fed. The Service accommodation, had it been available, is above the Junior Ranks Mess. The Service accommodation would have been free whereas the civilian accommodation was to be approximately £10 000, which can not be considered good value for money. That said, this particular accommodation was chosen for its central location and the fact that it negated the need to feed the cadets elsewhere at an even greater cost. Service accommodation was available for the staff and with the limited availability of transit accommodation in Gibraltar this may have been the best option. The booking was sorted out over the phone (the brief for the previous year stated that the same accommodation was to be used – [REDACTED] was known by the management) and no deposit was paid. The accommodation was

to be confirmed when [REDACTED] flew out prior to the camp. It is fairly well known that approval to remove cadets from school is not always granted; however, it is curious that the 'new' dates are during term time, but Service accommodation was still not available. It may have been advisable to adjust the dates to when the accommodation was vacant, but the accommodation is not just for cadets and is regularly full to capacity.

Activities

9. This camp was originally envisaged as a SCUBA AT expedition making use of local approved and professionally qualified commercial trainers. In the early stages of planning it became apparent that commercial trainers could only be used if they were on a new approved list. [REDACTED] was trying to get [REDACTED] chosen provider on the list, but eventually the nature of the camp was altered and was to proceed with a range of alternative activities such as snorkelling, paddle boarding, caving, walking and similar. An offer of a member of HQAC staff to attend the camp was made by [REDACTED] but not taken up.

10. Many of the activities were booked over the phone by [REDACTED] paying no deposit, to an individual who had subsequently left the employ of the activity provider. The company had still been willing to help but at the time of cancellation no deposit had been paid and no activities were fully booked.

11. Planned activities were all supported by [REDACTED] with supporting documentation, including RA, put in place. There was a good deal of 'fine tuning' of paperwork in the weeks just prior to the camp dates but all necessary documentation was completed with [REDACTED] HQAC and the [REDACTED] regular contact.

Recommendations

12. I believe that there is currently a camp review in progress which may make some or all the following recommendations nugatory. However, it is my **opinion** that:

- i. HQAC should have some oversight of all camps, particularly overseas and consideration should be given to handing over some of the organization of the camp to HQAC (TG2?). Oversight on this occasion may have solved the accommodation conflict with the ensuing savings of cost. It could also prevent units being visited by multiple groups, thereby stretching the host camp, though the ACLO in Gibraltar was content with this camp running.
- ii. Squadrons should not organize overseas camps for the exclusive use of their squadrons, or a small number of chosen squadrons. However even handed they are run, they give the impression of favouritism.
- iii. Planning for camps, whoever carries it out, should be done early with agreed timescales and it should be demonstrable that all tasks have been completed on time and to a satisfactory standard. I would recommend that actions are agreed at the outset and a 'full meeting' of all involved staff should be held if there are major changes to ensure actions are not missed (such as a change of direction of the camp from SCUBA to other activities). The phrase 'its in hand' should not be used – it should be 'yes, it is done and here is the proof'. There are aide memoirs available to provide a 'to do' list and a number of SMEs that can assist.

Summary/Observations

13. [REDACTED] has a history of planning successful AT expeditions to Gibraltar and if the flights had been paid for in full when required there is an excellent possibility that the 2015 camp would also have been a success. However, the fine detail, in my opinion, was lacking. I am uncomfortable with the fact that no deposit had been made to the accommodation provider – it would not be unfeasible that the rooms could have been taken by someone else – and even a member of staff giving out one room when they realised no deposit had been received would have been problematic. I am uncomfortable with the fact that no deposit had been made to the activity provider and in the event the activities were taken by someone else, though the company were willing to assist. I am uncomfortable with the fact that the cadets were to be taken out of school term time on the premise that Service accommodation was not available during the school holiday time and yet they were still destined for civilian accommodation with the inherent additional costs. Wherever the money comes from, using it when not essential means that it isn't available for other purposes. I am uncomfortable that RA and supporting documentation was left until fairly late on. I accept that the focus of the expedition had changed, but the 'problems' with SCUBA were known very early in the year, or earlier, and plans should have been made at that point on finalising alternative activities along with necessary documentation. I am uncomfortable that the balance of the air fare was not paid by the 25 May deadline. The debacle that occurred during June with the reminders and no clear direction on who was paying what and when doesn't detract from the fact that the deadline had been missed by 2 weeks when the first reminder was received. A contract was entered between [REDACTED] and Monarch to pay the balance by 25 May, albeit [REDACTED] had asked [REDACTED] to pay the deposit on [REDACTED] behalf, and by this date the money was not available, no alternative financing had been sought and no request to pay on his behalf had been made.

Conclusion

14. This investigation was carried out fairly quickly and covers only the most pertinent and obvious points. However, it appears that in terms of permissions, staffing, supporting documentation and similar that ACO regulations had been followed. It is always easier to criticise with the power of hindsight, but I believe that best practice would indicate that the following should have been done:

- i. Earlier engagement with [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] department to ensure that supporting documentation is in place in a timely manner.
- ii. Accommodation, preferably Service, should be booked with necessary deposits paid and receipt obtained.
- iii. Activities should be booked with necessary deposits paid and receipts obtained.
- iv. An agreed action plan should have been produced with oversight by the rest of the 'committee' or other personnel so that important actions were not missed. This is particularly relevant to the payment of the balance of the air fare where 5 weeks extra time was given by Monarch and actions were not carried out.
- v. Control of money could have been tighter. Though no improper actions are suggested, money in from cadets was late and there was good deal of cash available to the [REDACTED] due to previous poor ATM availability.

vi. [REDACTED] has offered to make good all money lost by cadets from his own pocket. This seems unfair – though I don't have a suggestion on where the money should come from instead.

[REDACTED]