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Witness Name: Michael Lawrence Riddell-Webster

Statement No.:

Exhibits:

Dated: 14<sup>th</sup> June 2016

**In the matter of an investigation into the death of  
Mr Ahmed Jabbar Kareem Ali**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF MICHAEL  
LAWRENCE RIDDELL-WEBSTER**

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I, Michael Lawrence Riddell-Webster, will say as follows:-

1. I am making this statement for the purposes of the investigation into the death of Mr Ahmed Ali.

**Background**

2. During 2003, I deployed on Operation TELIC as the Commanding Officer of the Black Watch (BW) Battlegroup (BG) and between 06 April and 27 Jun 2003 I was based in Basrah. At the time I was a Lieutenant Colonel. On 11<sup>th</sup> April 2003, No 1 Coy of the Irish Guards was subordinated to the BW Battlegroup and came under my command until 9 May 2003, when the company was recovered to Germany.
3. Prior to entering Iraq, we had spent lot of time thinking about our approach to operations in Basrah once we had entered the city. As a way of thinking about that, the metaphor used was "to take the head off the Ba'ath party without destroying the body". Our orders, which came from Maj Gen Robin Brimms (the Divisional Commander) were transmitted via 7 Armd Bde. We knew our mission was to take Basrah and that we would probably be involved in maintaining order. We had thought about looting but had not anticipated the scale of the looting that took place and there was a limit to what we could do; an Armoured Infantry Battlegroup is designed for war fighting, not peace support operations.

4. Prior to entering Basrah, I was aware that looting was likely to occur as we'd spent a fortnight dealing with the small town of Az-Zubayr, where the same sorts of behaviours had occurred, but I didn't have the manpower to deal with it.
5. In Basrah, maintenance of the town water supply was an imperative in temperatures of 30<sup>o</sup>c and water pumps don't work without electricity so I had given orders to guard the electricity sub-stations and water pumps and also the hospitals. In addition to protecting the pre-planned priorities, in the first week or so, we were finding a huge number of ammo dumps all over the place and there were weapons everywhere. It wasn't constant, but there were daily outbursts of shooting and looters were much lower down the list of priorities.
6. As we entered Basrah, the scale of the looting took everyone by surprise and there was little we could do to control a population of over a million. Firstly, I had committed troops to priority tasks, and secondly there weren't that many troops. We entered Basrah on the 6th April 2003 and we had to find a reasonably safe camp that evening. We ended up in the old Ba'ath party HQ. I recall that as we got there at around 4pm people were running out with bathroom taps: anything that belonged to the State got looted; I think that the private shops were much less affected.
7. The two tank squadrons were ineffective against looters; they were not equipped for the dismounted role. From the 11<sup>th</sup> April, I had 5 companies under command – 4 rifle companies (2 from the BW and two from the IG), and my Support Coy. But, in a large city, even 5 companies is a very limited number of troops. In the early days, I consciously accepted there was nothing we could do about the looting.
8. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, there had been an "oil-for-food" programme, which had two warehouses (containing broadly sugar, soap, coffee, tea and salt) in Basrah. The warehouse in the BW BG area got stripped bare, including the roof. That took days. There was wide-scale looting but I don't remember there being that much of real value to loot. Initially, the main looting was centered on the "oil-for-food" warehouse. Looters would take whatever they could get their hands on and would carry loot off by any means that they could; their hands, donkey carts or on the roofs of their cars. The "oil for food" warehouse alone would have taken one of my two rifle companies to guard so I made a conscious decision to allow it to be looted.
9. I had been in command of the BW during a tour of Kosovo in 2001 and at that point we were helping the civil authorities maintain law and order. So the BW had an understanding before we went to Iraq of what we might be faced with and which had helped during the advance planning prior to the invasion of Iraq. The Irish Guards

were not part of the BW BG during the Kosovo tour or during the planning period prior to the invasion of Iraq and so had not had the benefit of this experience.

10. I was personally out and about in Basrah for the majority of each day. There were daily BG meetings in the afternoon, at which BG HQ was kept informed as to what was happening on the ground, which was a two-way process. Later in the evening, I would take part in a Brigade conference call. There were about 20 people at the BG meeting. The key players would be there – my BG HQ staff and all sub-unit commanders – in the early days the sub-unit commanders included the 2 tank squadron commanders. Other sub unit commanders included were the Battery Commander and the Engineer Sqn Commander.
11. On the 11<sup>th</sup> Apr, the two Armoured BGs (Scots DG and 2RTR) were withdrawn from the city and the 2 Irish Guard companies, which had been part of the Scots DG BG, came under my command. From then the two Irish Guards company commanders, one of whom was Maj Peter MacMullen, attended my BG meetings. I would start the meeting by reporting intelligence and orders from 7 Armd Bde, and this would be followed by updates from all at the meeting. After that I would issue directions. The meeting would take 45 minutes to an hour. The majority of discussion related to current operations in the BG area such as shootings, weapons finds, and in the early days there was a lot about where we were and who was who as we tried to establish ourselves.
12. Before and after the BG meetings, there were lots of informal conversations and I have no doubt some of these were about how to deal with looting. However, I don't recall hearing anyone talk about throwing people into water. If I had, I would have stopped it as unacceptable. If throwing people into water had been discussed formally at BG meetings (and I am sure that it wasn't) then I would have said it wasn't to happen. I have been asked about a reference in Peter MacMullen's statement where he describes an incident in which 40 looters were taken down to the river to get wet. I don't recall that happening: I'm not saying it didn't happen, I'm just saying that I don't remember it being reported. But I would have said that it wasn't acceptable.
13. We had an Engineer Squadron and they had an incident where someone went into the water, and there was a debate about whether they had been pushed in or not. There was an RMP investigation that must have failed to produce any evidence of wrongdoing and I don't think it was pursued. There would have been a discussion at the BG meetings about using water at that point. There's no way I would have sanctioned that as an acceptable way of treating looters.

14. In the early part of our occupation of Basrah, I knew about the looting and, at that stage, I would have said to people to ignore the looters. Early on it was just about establishing ourselves and gaining some control over the city. I hoped that once something had been looted, such as the "oil-for-food" warehouse and the supplies had gone, the looting would stop. In that early period the Imams broadcast to the population, during Friday prayers, that looting was unacceptable and that everyone should hand the looted goods in. I remember being surprised by the amount of vehicles and other looted materials that subsequently appeared at a range of mosques around the town.
15. Early on, if we captured someone we thought was a belligerent, we hooded them, in accordance with our training. I can't say this didn't happen to looters, but I don't think people were picking up many looters in that period. Early on we had an incident where a detainee died in custody who had been hooded. The incident was thoroughly investigated and orders were received to stop the hooding. I would have passed these orders on to the sub unit commanders.
16. I think from about late April onwards we had established ourselves and priorities changed. After the first few days, I recall that the looting had died down considerably. I saw this myself and it was reported to me as well. I recall that subsequently, the main looting activities centered on two places; one was in a depot on the Southern edge of Basra, where there was an enormous quantity of concrete reinforcement bars and the other was the Southern Oil Company depot. My recollection that the looting reduced over time from its' initial intensity is based on the fact that soon there was little of value left to loot, apart from at the two compounds referred to above. Also, a degree of order had been restored, albeit a flimsy one. And looting was not a topic of daily discussion at the BG meetings: there were other higher priorities throughout the tour.
17. Once we were able to concentrate on other priorities we would have tried to work out what we might do about looting. We must have had a debate about whether to shoot people for looting and decided that we would not do so. There was also a debate about whether to fire warning shots and decided that this would be counterproductive. This decision would have been taken at either Bde HQ or BG HQ.
18. One specific instance of looting that I recall and where we were able to take successful preventative action was when thieves tried to drill their way into a bank to steal the cash. When we first got there some people had died in the vault. We were able to stop the looting and we employed a team of locals to drill their way into the vault, in order that we might safeguard the cash, which we achieved successfully.

19. I was aware that patrols continued to encounter looting and took some measures to deter it. The problem was that there was nowhere to take looters other than our bases. There was no prison, no judicial system and no local police. At that stage, the direction from me was that they would go down the Prisoner of War (PoW) chain until we got the local police stations up and running. If we caught looters, we would hold them in Company bases for a couple of hours under armed guard, but not hooded because, as I have said, by then it was banned. They would probably also not be in handcuffs but I cannot say for certain. An effective solution to countering looting eluded us.
20. In the early days I never personally deterred looters. At that stage, I might have taken recovered loot to the local mosque, but I am sure that that approach would have been at my initiative. Later on, when I encountered looting on patrol I sometimes tried to stop it, but often ignored it. Once we re-established the police force, if I saw looters and was able to catch them, I would hand them over to either the local police or troops under my command.
21. Prior to the re-establishment of the local police force, I don't know whether looters were PoWs in a legal sense, but they were in the sense that we were arresting and detaining them and had no other way to deal with them than using the PoW chain. PoW holding cells were often rudimentary and, in the BG HQ camp, for example, was just a garage.
22. I would not be surprised if not all looters were being taken back to our bases, given the lack of facilities and our inability to deal with them. Nor would I be surprised if some patrols just let looters go. Certainly I wasn't told every time looters were picked up and I'd be surprised if Coy Comds knew of every instance. Pl Comds would have known what was going on in their platoons. It doesn't surprise me to hear that Pl Comds may have been developing home-grown methods to deter and deal with looters. However, they were not acting without direction and so I would be surprised if they were adopting extra ordinary measures to deal with looters.
23. I have been asked by the Inspector what I would have done had I been in the position of a Company Commander faced with a helpless situation who perceived a need to do something out of a sense that looters should be deterred. Early on, I would have expected them to be put back through the PoW chain. Later on, once some order had been restored, looters should have been taken back regardless of whether or not troops thought it was a waste of time. I remember that, at the reinforcing metal compound, I put a guard on the site, but the site was big and although the guard was meant to be a deterrent it was clear that it could not completely stop people gaining access. The compound had a perimeter wall that was broken in a number of places. If the guard

caught a looter, I can't remember exactly what they would have done with them, but think the looter would just be held in the compound for a period. It was a pretty hopeless task and I could see that soldiers were frustrated. I personally remember capturing a lorry load of metal reinforcing bars that had been looted. We let the driver go but returned the lorry to the reinforcing metal compound.

24. I remember that the Basrah General Hospital (BGH) was not far from the compound (which was a hotspot all the way through) where all the concrete reinforcing metal was, and if memory serves was on the same road as the general hospital.
25. The Inspector has asked me whether I was aware that one PI Comd had thought the best thing to do was to detach a donkey from its cart that was filled with loot and drive over the cart in a Warrior. I don't remember that and don't believe that I would have sanctioned such a thing at the time if I had known. The Inspector has also asked me what I would think of hosing looters down. I would have regarded hosing down as unacceptable. I can believe that people were being driven some distance from where they were being caught and dropped off and I would have thought that was acceptable. It is true that we did not train people to deal with any of this, other than training on how to deal with PoWs.
26. The incident in question happened the night before the two IG companies left Basrah. The company involved in the incident had had soldiers killed during the break into Basrah and I would speculate that that may have had an influence on how they reacted to those they caught looting. I don't remember hearing about the incident on the 8<sup>th</sup> May at the time, but must have heard the next day during the BG meeting. I don't remember seeing Peter MacMullen before the court martial in 2006.
27. I'm not aware of hearing of Niall Brennan (who the Inspector reminded me was a PI Comd in No 1 Company) observing looters being thrown from a pier. I'm not sure if I would have considered that as being dangerous, but would have regarded it as unacceptable behavior. I would concur with Niall Brennan's reported view that, if someone was in danger you should attempt to rescue them.
28. By this point the situation had changed dramatically from fighting our way into the city in complete pandemonium to a more stable environment. From Northern Ireland (NI) and Kosovo we (the BW) had constant training to deal with how we should operate under those conditions and the BG was defaulting to NI standard operating procedures. The BW BG had also deployed to Kosovo relatively recently and so the soldiers in 1BW had been through something in peacekeeping terms that was not entirely dissimilar to Basrah, post the occupation of the city. I do not think that the IG

companies had been in Kosovo or Ireland recently, so they may have found the experience more difficult.

29. An Armoured Infantry BG is configured to fight a war, but it is not the right instrument to deal with restoring peace in a city because there are not enough dismounted and suitably equipped troops. The only way to prevent our inability to deal with large scale looting would have been to have many more dismounted troops and a police force. From our arrival in Basrah, we were expected to fulfill all the functions of the government. In these situations, there's always going to be an interregnum between the old order and the new and I don't think there is anyone apart from soldiers who can provide the security as the transition occurs and we just didn't have enough troops to do that completely. Choices over relative priorities were required.
30. You cannot set rules for every situation. The best you can do is to instill an ethos about what is right and acceptable and what is not. It is all about what was an acceptable way to behave. And you can only instill such an ethos in the BG by training together. The whole of 2002 was spent training the BW BG together so everyone knew what I wanted them to do and by and large it did work. It's about building an ethos in the Barracks, instilling a moral code into the members of the BG; it is always too late to be starting this process on operations.

**Statement of Truth**

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true

Signed  .....

Dated *14<sup>th</sup> June 2016* .....