



Ministry of Defence

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Dear Mr Salter,

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2014 following the inquest into the tragic deaths of Corporal William Savage, Fusilier Samuel Flint and Private Robert Hetherington. The Ministry of Defence takes its relationship with HM Coroners extremely seriously and we fully recognise how important it is that we learn all possible lessons to ensure that deaths in similar circumstances in the future are prevented.

Your Regulation 28 report focuses on the handling of information regarding potential threats on routes in Afghanistan, in particular 'hits' from the PISTOL system, and the clearance of threat warnings from routes.

As was explained at the inquest, PISTOL was brought into service as an addition to the suite of Counter Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IED) detectors and was designed to cross-cue other surveillance assets, as PISTOL was not able to provide a clear picture of what is taking place on its own. You heard that the PISTOL operators at the time of the incident on occasions cross-cued other surveillance assets to check locations without always informing the Battle Captain within the Operations Room, thus not allowing this officer to gain a clear and constant picture of information received, in this case along Route 611.

Immediately following this incident an in-depth analysis of the circumstances was conducted to ensure we identified and implemented all relevant lessons. The failure of effective communication of PISTOL information was highlighted and on 11 May 2013 a new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was issued and briefed to those operating PISTOL and to those using the information that PISTOL produced. This new SOP focussed on the passage of information and implemented the following changes:

- All PISTOL hits were to be reported to the Battle Captain or Duty Watch Keeper and entered onto JCHAT¹ as a PISTOL Report.

¹ JCHAT was a system that enabled secure text based instant messaging between UK and US users in theatre and beyond on their respective secret 'eyes only' systems.

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- Task Force Helmand Joint Operations Centre was to ensure that all units transiting areas where PISTOL hits had been reported and not cleared should treat such locations as Vulnerable Areas, thus prompting specific clearance techniques. These Vulnerable Areas were also to be entered onto other route planning assets that were in use at the time. Further, should it be felt necessary, areas of concern were to be temporarily placed out of bounds until locations were subject to formal IED clearance by specialist search teams on the ground.
- If, following investigation of PISTOL hits with the surveillance assets immediately available to him, the Battle Captain or Duty Watch Keeper was still not confident that a false or non-threatening hit had been confirmed, then he should call upon higher formation (i.e. Task Force Helmand) surveillance assets and, following further investigation, he could recommend that the area be investigated by a specialist search team.
- On a daily basis all PISTOL hits should be converted into a 'heat map' which should be analysed by intelligence staff and promulgated to all those conducting tactical level planning and patrol activity.


The lessons process also identified that operations room staff were not as aware as they should have been concerning the PISTOL capability. This was addressed by specific operations room staff training, which also included a thorough briefing on the new SOP.

The incident on 30 April 2013 was, as you point out, unusual in that the insurgents successfully utilised a tunnel for the first time. The PISTOL SOP specifically raises the possibility of tunnelling and instructs that should normal surveillance be unable to identify the source of PISTOL hits, then ground based C-IED assets should be deployed. The discovery of the tunnelling technique was immediately promulgated throughout Task Force Helmand and briefed back to our training organisation, who updated their training material to incorporate this new insurgent tactic in order to provide clear guidance for those operating in Afghanistan.

As you may be aware, PISTOL is no longer in use now that combat operations in Afghanistan have ended, and the Army does not see a role for this specific piece of equipment procured for Afghanistan in the immediate future. However, our Land Warfare Centre has captured all the relevant lessons from use of the equipment in Afghanistan, which will be used in the event that similar technology is required for future operations. Central to this is the requirement to understand the individual capabilities of C-IED systems, the effective fusing of the information they generate to gain a clear intelligence picture and then for the most relevant actions to be taken to remove any potential risks.

I hope this letter provides the assurance you were seeking and I am content for you to copy it to other Interested Persons and the Chief Coroner. I am aware of the public interest in this inquest and am keen to demonstrate publicly that we learned lessons from the tragic deaths of Corporal Savage, Fusilier Flint and Private Hetherington; therefore I have no objections to the Chief Coroner publishing our response should he wish to do so.

Yours truly,



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