**“It was time to go home”**  
It was time to go home, so the Sea-Watch 3 headed north. We had rescued 211 people, ten were medically evacuated from our ship over the next days. Nine of the survivors had relatives among the 17 who died on boat four. We’d witnessed a pushback and also heard about another boat that we didn’t get to, where there were only four survivors from a boat of over 90 people.

We looked after the people as best as we could. The medical team worked on the worst cases and as the immediate life threatening cases weretaken away, they were able to focus on the others. Some had really nasty burns from the fuel mixed with salt water, others were so traumatised by what they’d witnessed and been part of and the family members and friends that they had lost.

Their resolve was incredible. It really was. They were all so tightly packed onto the back of the ship and the food that we could give them was very basic. Italy made us wait five days before we were allowed to disembark them and in this time I got to know some of the people, only a little.

We took it in turns to be on watch and look after the people, taking part in the food preparation and the distribution of food and other essentials. My watch was midday until 4pm and midnight until 4am.

From around 3am, some of the Muslims would wake up to pray and to eat as it was Ramadan at the time. I gave an emergency blanket to act as a prayer mat to the guy who was leading the prayers each morning and then they’d start praying. I watched as they silently and humbly went through their rituals.

There was a small crèche near the hospital in what we call the recovery room. It’s where we take the most vulnerable as it is sheltered from the wind and the cold. Kids played while the mothers chatted and joked with one another. They settled into routines all on the hard metal deck of our ship. Some had beds, others didn’t. The only complaint that I really remember was about my cooking. I’d made couscous and some of them really didn’t like it. I really don’t blame them at all, it wasn’t the best. Another time I served rice and they were much more complementary, still we laughed about the time that I’d served the couscous.

At the back of the ship, people played cards and chatted all day. Sometimes they’d ask questions about what Europe was like. Sometimes we’d talk about football. Some wanted to know about my family back home. I too asked about their lives. One woman asked me if she would be sexually exploited again in Europe. She was so frightened that what she’d escaped from would just happen again. What do you say to a question like that. I just gave her honesty as it’s all I have: “You will need to be careful. Not everyone will be kind. But there are a lot of kind people too”. They were so traumatised from their experiences in Libya, this woman though, that was something else.

Eventually we were able to tell them that Italy had given us a safe port of entry and there were jubilant scenes on the ship, it just erupted. I love these moments, to see such happiness and relief. I try not to think about those who might be returned or fall into exploitation because there are very real dangers facing them in Europe, although most of them will be given asylum and be able to build new lives. Those of us that have worked in the camps can testify that for many, it will not be easy.

We told them that the next morning we would sail into the port and gave some small information about what would happen on arrival. The excitement on the ship was tangible. The chatter, the change in their faces, the overall feeling of relief. That night they went to bed, but in the recovery room, some of the women didn’t sleep, they were all just too excited. I tried to explain that they would need their energy “but tomorrow Brendan, I will see Europe!”

At around three in the morning, most of the people on the decks on the ship were asleep other than those excited ladies in the recovery room that is. Some people started to wake up. I asked what was going on? I said that they had another four hours before they needed to move, go back to sleep before you wake up the others.

Then I was told that this was all planned, it was Easter Saturday and the Christians were getting up for mass so that it would be finished with time still for the Muslims to do Ramadan. One guy who was a Christian preacher man told the others to stand for their mass, and then it started.

I’ve been to church a lot as a kid but I’d never seen a mass quite like this one. It was sung almost entirely. A sole female voice would sing so beautifully and then a hundred other voices would join in, repeating the words. It was powerful. At times feet pounded up and down on the metal decks. There was clapping and dancing. Over a hundred of them took part in it. The next song would begin and the next one and the next one. The preacher man sometimes would stop it for a few seconds to say some words and then that sole female voice would sound and boom, off it went again with incredible energy.

Then as quickly as it started it abruptly stopped. The preacher man said “thank you to our Muslim brothers and sisters for respecting our Christian celebration. Everyone now be quiet and move to the back of the ship so that our Muslim brothers can have their prayers”

And in a moment, they all fell silent and moved to the back of the ship. The Muslims moved forwards, there was an exchange of respect between the guy leading the Muslim prayers and the preacher man and then they lined up, around forty of them in rows of ten and the Islamic prayers began.

I’d never seen something like that before and I’m not going to try to make something more deep of it than what it was, because that would be easy to do, but it really was a moment of mutual respect, solidarity, and understanding on our ship and I was really lucky to be on shift to witness it. Sometimes we really are an oasis of love.

Soon enough we were in the port, the ropes were tied, the authorities came aboard and agreed how we were going to disembark the people. I said my goodbyes and went to sleep as this was going to take hours and I’d been awake all night.

The guy who had been leading the Muslim prayers hugged me. He spoke no English but simply put his hands together and bowed. I followed suit. One by one I said goodbye and then one by one they left the ship as I was asleep.

When I awoke it was all done, they were all gone. Our crews mission was complete – almost, we still had the big clean up to do. But for now it was done. The survivors of this ordeal would now go to quarantine for two weeks and then their asylum claims will be processed. They’ll just be starting the processing by now and be in reception centres somewhere in Italy.

Each of them has shown the most incredible courage. To get into a flimsy boat in the middle of night, with no life jacket and no lights, to head to a land that you have never known, on a boat that might not get there, knowing that 24,000 have died on the same route – that’s courage.

Most of them didn’t succeed on their first attempt, some having tried four, five or even six times. Most of them have been tortured. Most of the women – I can’t even speak. And though it all they showed respect, solidarity and dignity towards one another. I can’t articulate the respect that I have for them, the courage that they have, the determination and the sheer will power. I’ve learned so much about the human spirit from them. I hope with all my heart that they are welcomed. I wish them all the luck in the world for god knows what that they have endured.