

by Rebekah Hester Nov 2023



“Combien de morts vous faudra t’-il?”  
‘How many deaths will you need?’

As we come towards marking the 2 year anniversary of the Channel Tragedy where at least 27 people drowned in the English Channel in their attempt to find safety in the UK, our Resettlement Coordinator, Rebekah shares her experience of that night in Calais on the 24th November 2021.

“We were gathered at the hangar on the edge of the water, a mixture of nationalities, all volunteers or workers from local NGOs; we were surrounded by blue flashing lights, camera crews, candles, cardboard signs and the oncoming red van front lights which carried the bodies of the victims.

Though we were there, our updates were coming from online news apps, updates coming within minutes of each other: at least 15 dead...20 dead...27 dead...a mother and children dead...33 dead. Each red van that passed us was carrying a person that was just a number that we were reading on our phone screens.

There was a buzz there, the buzz of yet another protest, another opportunity to face the brutality of the CRS police force, another chance to hold those signs up in solidarity that shouted our words for everyone to see, a moment for news crews to finally give the British public a viewing from this side of the water. To share stories of the police brutality, of the tear gas, the shouting, the unfair confiscation of personal belongings, the daily evictions from living sites which were actually just tents and tarp in rat-festing ditches. The energy for that was high. But then individually, we would all have a little moment here and there, where it would sink in: children were on that boat. Could it have been someone that we had distributed to that day? Could it have been that man that I had chatted to a couple of days earlier, who we had given shoes to, and I remember him so clearly saying ‘today shoes, tomorrow England’. It wasn’t until the next day that we found out that the boat had left from Dunkirk so was unlikely to have carried people that we were supporting in Calais, but that only provided a moment of relief because the reality is that it ‘could have been’. At that point though, on that Wednesday night, we didn’t know anything, all we knew was what was being echoed through the crowd, from whispered sources or news reports, and those oncoming red vans.

Somewhere along the lines, we had word that the Minister of Interior, Gerald Moussa Darmanin was coming to commemorate the victims and the energy rose again: another chance to stand together to get our voices heard by policy makers, here at the makeshift morgue holding a growing number of victims, finally a number that couldn’t be ignored. Unlike the 1 man the week before who had been hit by a train. Unlike the 1 that had died when he was hit by a lorry. We were prepped ready with our signs high and determination strong, searching every new onward car, questioning ‘could this be him?’. He didn’t come.

When the red vans started to slow in number, we laid our candles out on the ground in front of the entrance to the hangar. There were CRS officers blocking the view of the building with their flashing blue light vans. Songs were sung, French lyrics that none of us really knew but had heard enough times by this point, from the number of vigils that we had already attended in the previous weeks. Eventually in the eyes of the CRS officers, we had out stayed our welcome, the camera crews had left and now it was our turn. They kicked the candles away.

‘COMBIEN DE MORTS VOUS  
FAUDRA T’-IL?’  
‘HOW MANY DEATHS WILL  
YOU NEED?’



One of the things that shocked me most about my time in northern France is that as a British person, how come nobody was talking about this? How come nobody was talking about the blatant police brutality that was happening every day? How come nobody was talking about how tear gas was used unprovoked? How come nobody was talking about how people were sleeping in ditches amongst rats? How come nobody was talking about the water tanks, provided by a charity and the displaced communities only water source, were being slashed by members of the CRS police force? How come nobody was talking about the hostile environment that was purposely feeding illegal human smugglers into work? How come we weren’t talking about something that was literally happening on our doorstep? 21 miles, away, the distance between Barnstaple and Lynton. How come nobody was talking about the weekly deaths?

‘Combien de morts vous faudra t’-il?’  
‘How many deaths will you need?’

At least 27.

**“There are two things that I will always remember about my time working in Calais, the smell and the shoes – if they had any. The smell of bonfire on people’s clothes: their only source of warmth. And the sand embedded into their shoes, a soundless sign of another failed attempt to cross and escape this hostility.”**

**A report published this month by the UK Department for Transport identified failings that led to the dinghy not being rescued by HM Coastguard that night:**

**Ways in which you can help;**

**Write to your MP calling for the expansion of safe and legal routes**

**[Join Refugee Councils campaign for a fair and humane asylum system here](#)**