



THE ROAD TO

IRAQ

6 people. 2 fire appliances. 3,000 miles. 10 days.
How and why we did it



Words and pictures by Duncan Milligan

The task was simple to explain: take a team of six people and two fire appliances, leave England, travel over 3,000 miles through Europe into Iraq and down to Baghdad. It would mean passing through an area of Turkey with a low-level guerrilla war going on and which, when we arrived, resembled an area under occupation.

Security concerns were such within Iraq and for our journey through Turkey that we could not flag up either our destination or route in advance. Few people in the FBU were aware of the trip.

We would have to keep out of trouble and avoid attention by travelling in two bright red fire appliances – one for delivery to the Iraqi Kurdistan Workers Syndicate Union (IKWSU) in Iraqi Kurdistan and the other to the Iraqi Assembly in Baghdad – with ‘Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue’ emblazoned across them and with working sirens and blue lights. Only the Fire Brigades Union would have attempted it. And no, we couldn’t stay out of trouble.

Our departure date was set for Sunday 24 September 2006, returning through Turkey and flying back from Istanbul on Wednesday 4 October. It would be ten days of a gruelling schedule travelling on 20-year-old appliances that were not going to have the creature comforts of modern long-haul coaches.

The team of six were three serving or former West Midlands firefighters and FBU officials who were also the drivers: Mick Henn (serving); Phil Goalby (retired) and Norman Breckenridge (retired). Also on the trip were Brian Joyce (former south west EC member); Val Salmon (Greater Manchester control and at that time EC member for control staff) and Duncan Milligan (the FBU’s head of research and communications).

Hunted

The delivery of the two appliances was part of a bigger picture of support for the firefighters and trade union movement in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq. On this occasion, part symbolic and part practical, to assist Iraqi firefighters in serving their communities, and help to promote the trade union movement in both countries. The contribution of the

FBU has had a positive impact across Iraqi and Kurdish trade unions. The General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW), is emerging from years of being underground, hunted and oppressed by Saddam and his Baath Party.

Brian Joyce, who has been to Iraq on several occasions, explained why the FBU was delivering the appliances: “The FBU was in Iraq within weeks of the end of the initial hostilities which followed the British and US-led invasion in 2003.

“There had been little to no investment in the fire service through most of Saddam’s reign, he preferred instead to equip his military for his various wars and to maintain his vicious and repressive regime.

“The aftermath of the invasion and the insurgency which is increasing each day is also taking its toll and has brought even more misery to the people of Iraq. But I don’t believe in sitting back and doing nothing just because something looks difficult – that’s the instinct of anyone in the fire service.

“When everyone else is heading away from the trouble, our training takes us towards it. Iraqi firefighters are trying to work in fairly desperate

We had advance warning of the dangers of the last leg of our journey through Turkey

conditions. They needed help and we have made a small contribution.

“The FBU went to Iraq when others were, quite naturally, reluctant to go. In that sense we have, to a degree, led the way for other trade unions, by forging links and supporting unions in Iraq.”

Brian Joyce, modestly personified, had caused a stir on previous visits to deliver fire kit and helped raise the FBU’s profile within Iraq to near legendary proportions.

On previous visits the FBU’s efforts in helping to equip the Iraqi fire service had made national news across Iraq because it was so unusual. Brian, with his shock of grey hair, had become the well-known face of the FBU in Iraq during his five previous visits to deliver kit.

His visits to Baghdad and Basra were at a time when foreigners were



Once on mainland Europe we hammered on down through Serbia

being kidnapped and killed. Safety was never far from Brian’s thoughts and his concerns were to remain for this team.

We were warned in advance about the dangers of the last leg of our journey through Turkey. The Kurdish PKK were active and we were advised not to travel in the hours of darkness – “not in the evening after dark and not early in the morning before dawn, it is dangerous to travel at these times.” I had been told before leaving the UK by an Iraqi Kurd who had done the journey himself many times. This was confirmed by other sources en route.

The Kurds had been gassed, killed, tortured and persecuted by Saddam. But the Turks and Iranians had historically got in on the act and were not supportive of the creation of the Kurdish region of the Iraqi Federation in northern Iraq, established under UN protection after the first Gulf War. Just before we left the UK, there were reports that the Iraqi Kurdish region had been subjected to artillery shelling from Iran and that the situation was getting worse.

Whatever was happening in the Iraqi Federation, it was becoming



BACKING IRAQI FIRE CREWS

Brian Joyce has been several times to Iraq to meet local fire crews and representatives from the Iraqi trade union movement. His early visits found a trade union movement emerging from years of repression under Saddam Hussein and an Iraqi fire service in a desperate state.

He explains: "In those early trips I found people in Baghdad trying to get on with their lives amid a background of gunfire and explosions. There was desperate poverty to add to that as well as being effectively in the middle of a war zone.

"Firefighters are firefighters. There is a bond which connects us, we do the same job and take the same risks wherever we are in the world. "Iraqis join their fire service for the same reasons we do. They are committed in the same way as we are and serve their communities as we do.

"In Iraq I found firefighters were trying to tackle fires wearing only sandals, t-shirts and boilersuits and suffering horrific burns as a result. Like firefighters all over the world all they were trying to do was save lives and help their people, but

they were doing that in appalling and dangerous circumstances.

"We could not in all conscience stand back and do nothing. That is not the instinct of anyone in the fire service anywhere in the world. But supplying kit could only deal with the symptoms. They also needed and wanted free and democratic trade unions and we have assisted with that.

"They asked us to come back, we promised we would and we have. The FBU has organised – with the help and assistance of a few brigades – numerous deliveries of fire kit, uniforms and protective equipment including helmets, tunics and boots.

"As we delivered the PPE we met with the firefighters and explained how the kit worked. The reaction was amazing. In a small way we have given them some hope.

"The people need help and they need hope. There is a role, however small and insignificant, for us there.

"We've done a lot of work and the next logical step was delivering some appliances. After these we hope to deliver some others."



Brian Joyce had been to Iraq before and promised to help the country's firefighters

TIMELINE

Sunday 24 September

Dover through France for first stop over that evening in Belgium

Monday 25 September

through Belgium to Germany stopover north of Ravensburg

Tuesday 26 September

through rest of Germany, Austria, Slovenia and stop in Zagreb, Croatia

Wednesday 27 September

through rest of Croatia through to Serbia, stop in southern Serbia short of the Bulgarian border, having skirted Kosovo.

Thursday 28 September

through Serbian/Bulgarian border then through Bulgaria to border with Turkey (arrive later afternoon at Turkish border).

Friday 29 September

at 00.30 get through Turkish border, travel through the night and all day. Get lost around Ankara and then make it to outside Kirrikale for an overnight stop.

Saturday 30 September

travel more difficult and one pump breaks down in Kayseri, but make it through and stop at Metalya overnight.

Sunday 1 October

from Metalya to Diyarbakir where we meet up with Abdhullah Mohsin and the guide who will take us into Iraq. Head for the border crossing into the northern Kurdish region of Iraq. Held on the border 200 metres short of Iraq from mid-afternoon.

Monday 2 October

late morning, released and arrived Dahok, Iraq at 3pm. We had only slept for 21 hours in the previous 132.

Tuesday 3 October

back over border to Diyarbakir where we stay overnight.

Wednesday 4 October

plane from Diyarbakir to Istanbul and from Istanbul to London Heathrow.

clear that there was a lot more to it than death squads and bombings. There was also a lot more to it than the UK-US-led invasion and the continuing presence of the coalition military.

Several systems were in place to help us stay safe during our journey. Each day we would call in at an agreed time and positively confirm our position with GMC fire control. This was one of the roles and responsibilities of Val and, if we did go missing, it would be known quickly.

In addition, we would keep in touch every day with the FBU head office who would advise us on any new risks identified in the areas we were travelling through or were about to travel through. This included not only the situation in Iraq, but in the Kurdish area of Turkey which was volatile and the Kurdish region of northern Iraq which was surrounded by hostile and, at times, aggressive neighbours.

If the situation did start to go even more pear-shaped security wise, we would re-assess whether we would go into Iraq and if so, how far. There was nothing we could do in terms of concealment as two bright red 15-ton fire appliances would stand out as they are designed to.

If the appliances had been covered in the disrupted pattern dark green of European camouflage or disrupted light brown pattern of desert camouflage they would look like military vehicles, potentially making them a target. If we dressed in camouflage and wore flak jackets we could also look like military personnel.

Like the other drivers, Mick Henn drove 2,000 miles in 10 days



Neither would be a good idea in a potentially hostile south east Turkey or in Iraq itself. Bright red it was then. So there could be no mistaking or hiding what we were or from where we came.

Perhaps any hostiles would be too gobsmacked to do anything if they saw two large bright red fire engines hammering towards them. What we were not sure about is what we were going to do in Iraq or what to expect, as the situation could change in a matter of hours. All there was to go on was the daily news reports of

OUR ROUTE





death and destruction as the country headed towards open and obvious civil war. However, once we met our contacts in Iraqi Kurdistan we knew they would be aware of the current situation and would make it very clear to us whether it was safe to continue or if our journey would be coming to a sudden end.

But what reality would we find behind the news reports, when we got to the end of our journey? It felt as if we may be heading towards some modern-day Heart of Darkness, a real-life remake of Apocalypse Now with a new version of a crazed Colonel Kurtz to meet at the end of the journey.

In Conrad's Heart of Darkness, and in Coppola's Apocalypse Now – which was an updated film of the book with the action transplanted from Africa to Vietnam – the main characters travelled by boat (the book is narrated from a boat on the Thames).

We were going by Eurotunnel and motorway, perhaps the modern-day equivalents of the boat and water. Ready when I arrive at the Eurotunnel terminal near Dover at midday on Sunday 24 September 2006 are two spruced up Perkins pumps. Phil Goalby, Brian Joyce, Mick Henn, Val Salmon and Norman Breckenridge had already been there for a few hours undertaking one

final check of all kit and ensuring the travel and Customs documents were in perfect order.

The appliances may be 20 years old but they pretty much looked the part. Both came complete with a range of kit including roof ladder, 13.5m ladder, 70mm and 45mm hose, hose reel, spare hose reel branch, 15m and 30m line, two dividing breeches, a zip gun, reciprocating saw, an EPCO kit and hydraulic cutting equipment.

Perkins had carried out some refurbishment to get them into reasonable mechanical order. Whether these two pumps could do over 3,000 miles across Europe and into Iraq was another matter.

Could the Perkins diesel engine in one and the Cummings diesel engine in the other survive the trip over some challenging terrain and over distances they were never built for? This was not going to be a five-minute dash on British tarmac, but a very long haul over who knew what kind of roads.

Safety

A quick glance down the paperwork confirmed we were on a humanitarian mission delivering two fire engines and associated equipment to a Mr S Hussein in Baghdad. The name rings an alarm bell.

A closer inspection reveals it to be an entirely different Mr S Hussein

who could not be further in every way from the other S Hussein who at that time was still being kept carefully alive so he could be hanged later.

Our one was a Mr Subhi A Hussein, a member of the Baghdad Assembly – the Iraqi Parliament – who was to take formal delivery of an appliance on behalf of the Iraqi fire service.

Over a last coffee in the Eurotunnel terminal there is a final call to Mark Dunne, Merseyside FBU, and Kevin Brown, FBU north east regional secretary to check up on developments in the Merseyside dispute. Neither reports any problems.

We departed with the two appliances in separate following trains.

As we pass through the French side of passport control the French border official looks at the paperwork.

“You are going to Iraq?” he asks, incredulous. It was not to be the last time our journey raised an eyebrow.

The safety of those on the journey

**The team were delivering
the fire appliances to a
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was never far from Brian Joyce's mind. He told me: “This trip took eight months to plan and organise, all the funding had to be found through donations, the same for the two appliances and firefighting equipment they carried. Passage across the channel, routes, toll roads, calculating the diesel required, different currencies, Customs documents, letters and documents for the borders, letters written to each of the countries' embassies we were travelling through. Finding a company willing to provide personal insurance for the crews and green cards for the drivers all had to be prepared. All paper work had to be correct; we could not afford to make any mistakes.

“There was also the kit we might need for the journey ourselves, attempting to cover all eventualities that may occur, extra diesel, emergency food, sleeping bags, stove, first aid kits, walkie-talkies for use between machines, even tents. The

list was endless.

“The preparation was extremely important; if we got that right we could, hopefully, deal with most events and situations. All the team had different parts to play and understood the issues and problems we might face through the various meetings that took place prior to the off.

“On my previous visits my safety and security was dealt with by my comrades in Iraq and Kurdistan, they would assess the risk and make the decisions about travel arrangements and where I stayed while in Iraq. Iraq is clearly a dangerous environment and precautions have to be taken. You have to be aware and stay aware, but I trusted the people I was with.

“On my last visit to Basra whilst I was distributing fire kit, I was suddenly told it was time to go back to my hotel room. It was only 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I was told not to answer my door and stay in my room.

“As an added precaution a guard was placed there all night with an AK47. Early the next morning my stay in Basra was cut short as I left the city. I discovered later that an American businessman had been kidnapped from a hotel down the road by insurgents dressed as security police. Also within a short period of time several bombs exploded in Basra, these were the first of many to occur over the following months.

“It became common procedure; anyone who called at my hotel room always pre-arranged it with me beforehand. If they hadn't, the knock on the door stayed unanswered.”

Since then the situation in Iraq had become even worse and was deteriorating by the day. To make matters worse, the low-level guerrilla war between Turkey and Kurdish separatists in the south east Kurdish region of Turkey was beginning to warm up.

“We were going to have to be careful and make sensible decisions about our own safety,” said Brian. “It was not possible to be certain about what the state of play would be in Iraq when we got there – that was more than a week away.”

The first part of our journey – by Eurotunnel – was to prove the easiest. An amazing feat of civil engineering, it is also a magnificent symbol of modern European unity and human endeavour.

When we get to mainland Europe

from our little island off the north shore of Europe, history steps on our toes immediately. Almost every road sign and every map-reading told a little bit of a longer and bloodier European history.

Signs to the Somme, Dunkirk, Waterloo, Ypres, Bastogne. Later, there would be signs to Berlin and Nuremberg. The further we went on our journey and the chronology of history became closer. Sometimes much closer: Slovenia, Zagreb in Croatia, Belgrade in Serbia, skirting Kosovo with recent memories of conflict, massacres and bloodshed.

The remnants of the old Yugoslavia are perhaps Europe's own version of Iraq. Just the names of these places jogged memories of the darker side of we humans.

We have the skills to forge European unity out of wars. To build and do great things. But we are also capable of the worst stupidity, utter savagery and the destruction of what we have taken years – even centuries – to build by our endeavours.

A bomb or a missile destroys in seconds what it may have taken years to build. Destruction is quick and simple. Construction takes longer and is more difficult.

We can look down on the savagery of Iraq with an “Ah well, they are not civilised like us Europeans, what can you expect” approach. We can so quickly and conveniently forget our own European past of war, gas chambers and the very recent brutality of what happened in the former Yugoslavia.

Emergency

Our journey past and through former battlegrounds is gentler than for those who took part in them. Our first stop is Belgium. That evening over a bite to eat Norman, Mick and Phil gave me a quick run down of what is on the pumps. While we can remove our personal possessions, we can't take operational equipment off and the lockers can't be secured over night.

Phil says he has a two-ring gas stove and some basic food supplies for emergencies, plus coffee and tea. “You don't know what is going to happen, so it's best to be prepared,” he explains.

Norman tells me there are emergency sleeping bags and tents. “We don't know what we are going to face, we could have a breakdown in the middle of nowhere, but at least we





can get our heads down.”

Mick, the third driver, explains the extra fuel supplies we are carrying. “We’ve got four large cans of diesel for emergencies. The pumps will only do 10 to 12 miles a gallon so they’ll be thirsty.”

“We’ve enough extra diesel in the cans for each of them to be able to do another 90 miles. You never know what is going to happen.”

I don’t say anything, but wonder if this is not all a bit too cautious and over the top. What could happen? What I didn’t know at the time is that we were to make use of all of these. My travel companions, far from being over-cautious and fussy, knew a lot more than I did and were properly prepared.

They were also using many years of fire service training and experience. If plan A failed, what was plan B? They had one. If that failed what was plan C? They had one of those as well.

As we progressed on our journey I got the impression that my colleagues probably had fallback plans that took them through most of the letters in the alphabet. They were very experienced and practical people, which, as it turned out, was just as well.

The following morning we are on our way towards Germany heading east, then south.

We are just north of Ravensburg at 7.30pm and we stop for the night at a small motel by the side of the motorway. Our travel plan was simple and the same every day. Wake up, eat breakfast, check the pumps, jump in, get to the motorway, reach 60mph and stay at that for four hours. Stop for lunch, eat, check and fuel the pumps, jump in and get them up to 60mph for the next five hours.

It works and we batter along towards southern Europe. Through Germany, into Austria and then Slovenia. It all being European Union there are no borders and no border delays. The journey will be a cinch.

From coming off Eurotunnel we’ve been on toll roads almost non-stop. Chancing our arm at all the tollbooths we say we’re emergency vehicles and ask if we should be exempt. Those staffing the toll booths always smile and let us through.

This is just all too easy, although tiring. We’ll make Iraq with days to spare. No problem. Then we get to the Slovenian-Croatian border where we come to a halt for the first time.



Mick Henn cleans off the windscreen at a brief stop in Austria. Mile after mile of driving was broken for cups of tea brewed up in the back of a cab on the two-ring stove



Croatia is not in the EU, hence the border and customs checks.

The Croatians seem to have privatised their Customs. Their job seems to involve getting as much money out of you as they can.

The first official says we count as freight and wants to charge us 870 euros. Brian Joyce is having none of it and brandishes the letter confirming we are delivering humanitarian aid to the Iraqi fire service.

The official is not impressed and then suggests we need to pay for a Customs 'minder' to travel with us across Croatia with us picking up their hotel costs as well. Brian and Phil head off to track down another official; she is not helpful to start with. The explanations and production of paperwork continues, they bring her

to see the appliances. She smiles and tells us to go through. We have just saved 870 euros.

We head off. The delay costs us an hour and it is getting dark. We plough on to the Croatian capital Zagreb and stop for the night. There is an intriguing reminder of the country's recent past on the walls.

There are instructions on what to do if there is a fire with a little 'fire' illustration. Then there are instructions on what to do if we are bombed, with a little illustration of two planes dropping bombs.

It finishes with instructions on what to do if the hotel is invaded by troops, with a little illustration of troops carrying guns. It is a stark reminder of what had recently taken place in the former Yugoslavia.

In Croatia they won't let us get through the road tolls without paying. And it's not cheap. The last toll road cost us 33 euros for each appliance. Within a few hours we are at the Serbian border.

This could be where our problems start. The Serbians don't like the fact – and who can blame them – that the British carried out many bombing raids and caused a lot of destruction to their country. It would be perfectly understandable if they didn't welcome us with open arms.

Armed

We pull up at our usual spot at borders – which is the non-freight section – and stop. The border guard, who is armed and has more of a military air, is not happy at what we have done.



Driver Phil Goalby checks his mirrors as we leave one stop. We had a daily diet of toll roads but also areas of natural beauty, even in the rain

Passing through the roadworks at last we see a place at the side of the road. It has a garage at the side of it and looks like a family-run business. I mentally cross my fingers and hope – with the proximity to Kosovo – that they do not have any family reasons why they would turn us away because we are British.

With none of us speaking fluent Serbian, communications don't get off to a good start. Luckily for us there are two Bulgarians who speak both very good English and Serbian. It is indeed a family-run guest house, they have enough rooms for us and we are welcome. It's late and we ask for food or a nearby restaurant.

There isn't one. They have no beer for us but they will send their son to get some. An older and younger woman – who later turn out to be mother-in-law and daughter-in-law – have a quick discussion. The Bulgarians translate: "They will supply food from their own kitchen. It will be good. They will make you breakfast too."

Leaking oil

Is their garage open? Another family member says – through the Bulgarians – no problem. He doesn't mind taking a look at the oil leaking from the axle of one of the pumps.

He and Norman, while speaking no common language, go off to take a look. Norman has been concerned for some time about the oil leak from one of the axles. He, Phil and Mick have been calculating how much oil is being lost from the axle. The obvious concern is that the axle will seize up in the Turkish desert region and we'll be knackered.

Later we get the news that there is no major problem and as long as we keep an eye on the amount of oil leaking from it we should be OK. The food is taking longer than we thought.

When it arrives we are stunned. Starters are a huge plate of yellow peppers stuffed with feta-like cheese. Plus salad and beautifully presented fresh tomatoes.

Then comes pork. The chicken arrives. Thin cutlets fried in a very thin pancake type mixture. Best of all a crate of the local beer arrives. Later still comes the slivovic (plum brandy) which goes down well.

The Bulgarians, our translators, are jovial and talkative company. If all Bulgarians are like these two, they will be a very welcome addition to the

Having expected a degree of hostility in Serbia, the opposite is true. The public and local police wave to us

He directs us to a small single storey building and shouts instructions to his colleague, finishing by nearly spitting the word "Anglicky!", the local word for English. Expecting the local officials to take that as a signal to mess us around for a few hours, we are pleasantly surprised when they don't. Within 20 minutes our documents are stamped and we are through into Serbia.

Not a word of hostility from anyone. We attract attention on our journey but people are waving to us. So do the local police. The cost of the toll roads in Serbia are the most expensive we have come across. But then again, the British and Americans bombed their road bridges, power stations and other infrastructure, so they have to get the money back to

pay the cost of rebuilding. Having expected a degree of hostility in Serbia, we find the opposite is true.

A few more hours and we start seeing the road signs to Kosovo where the most recent problems have been, and where NATO troops are still stationed. We are determined to get as close to the Bulgarian border as we can before nightfall.

The team is tired, but good spirits and sense of humour is always present. We press on after dark and find the roads in south Serbia have the biggest set of roadworks we have seen. There appear to be mile after mile of tunnels being cut through rock in bite-sized chunks to make the roads wider. In total darkness, it is tiring and we're on the lookout for a guest house or motel.

EU. The warmth of the Serbians and Bulgarians has helped make it a very happy evening. It was to be the last pleasant evening for several days.

Increasingly exhausted by our journey, and filled with food, beer and slivovic, we each go off in turn to bed. The next morning is the usual routine: wake, breakfast, check the pumps, check the fuel hit the road, get up to 60mph and stay there.

We're at the Serbian-Bulgarian border in a hour. Again, no problems from either the Serbs or the Bulgarians and we sail through. It's amazing how helpful people can be when you're on a fire appliance. All we need is a form on the Bulgarian side declaring the pumps are disinfected. It costs us 9 euros.

Aggressive

Our aim is to get through Bulgaria into Turkey and as close to Istanbul as we can by nightfall. We're on schedule. The team agrees to have a quick stop off to swim in the sea as we skirt Istanbul and the Med. We'll have time.

We hit the Bulgarian-Turkish border at 4.30pm and the first phases of the border are no problem. We end up in the car queue for Turkish Customs which does not seem to be moving very quickly.

Brian Joyce jumps out the cab and works his magic with the man who turns out to be Chief of Customs. He fast tracks us and motions to his officials to sort us out and goes off at the end of his shift.

We were discussing among ourselves what we'd do later that evening when the problems kicked in. The officials who had come on shift would not speak to us. They would not even look at us.

It was difficult to fathom. The Turkish Government had been behaving in recent years. Midnight Express? Not any more sir, we have moved on from that. It was sprucing up its act in attempts to get into the European Union. Welcome to the new Turkey.

Unlike the Serbians whom we had bombed, Turkey is an ally. Unlike with the Serbians, we had not attacked the Turks since Gallipoli in 1915. A thousand welcomes to the new Turkey. No over bearing corrupt state any more. All that's gone.

Civil rights abuses? Oh no. In the past. Welcome to the new Turkey.

We watch as everyone else passes through. The car queue shortens. Our

gentle and diplomatic approaches have not worked and we start gentle hassling. Smiles and handshakes do nothing to melt the aggressive attitude of these officials. The first hints of a problem. Shoulder shrugs from the officials and suggestions we might have to pay "transit fees". Yes, they understood we were humanitarian aid and not a business but what could they do? Rules were rules although they would not say what those rules were.

Phil started brewing up some tea and coffee on his two-ring stove. Then some curry. Thank God someone had the common sense to bring the stove and supplies along.

More contact with the officials. We stressed the Chief of Customs had told them to sort us out. Well, came the reply, we can wait until he comes back on shift then. When was that? 9.15 next morning came the reply, the sly smile dripping with insincerity thrown in for free.

One official who would help said they would do what they could, but the paperwork had to be very precise. Otherwise we could have problems when we crossed the border from Turkey to Iraq.

We waited and watched them search the other vehicles as they passed through. They became very aggressive and nasty with people if they were challenged in any way.

Our outward show of good humour hides simmering frustration and anger at hours of delays at border

One youngster was caught with some minor bottled contraband and was marched off, being screamed at by one official, to dump it in the bin himself.

They appeared to be particularly obnoxious with their fellow Turks and Bulgarians. They were not like that with us.

Other officials suggest we may have to wait until morning. Can you sleep on the pumps and wait until morning? Not really, mate.

The team goes into a huddle. It is becoming obvious that we may have to give the officials a bung to get us through. We assess that the threat that we might have to sleep on the

It would not be a journey on foreign soil if we did not get lost. Speaking no Turkish (and the local speaking no English) we relied on Phil Goalby being fluent in Armish: It's up the road, left at the first junction, right at the second set of lights and keep going straight on. You can't miss it.



pumps and wait until morning is to help open our wallets. We are not happy about it, but any delay could threaten the whole trip. Our flights back were in a few days time and we had nearly 1,000 miles to cover across Turkey.

Eventually, the officials introduce us to a third man who speaks some English. "I am not a Customs official," he tells me. "I am a Customs broker, you understand?"

Perfectly. The officials don't want to be bribed directly. He is the go-between. We had seen him working very closely with the officials for several hours. So closely we had assumed he was one. Our outward show of good humour hides our simmering frustration and anger as several hours have now passed.

It takes 10 minutes and 12 euros for each appliance to get the proper official papers. Then there is the rest of the pay-off in the shadows behind the appliances. That's another \$50 US dollars and another 50 euros, many times more than the official cost.

LOST IN TRANSLATION



Welcome to the new Turkey. Have a nice day.

We had been stopped between passport control and customs for seven hours, it was near midnight and we would now struggle to find a place for the night. While we wait to go through the final border controls we agree to head for the first motel or hotel we find and try and get rooms.

At half past midnight we are over the border, angry, tired, cursing Turkish Customs and anxious at the impact the delay will have. It cost us three hours driving time but has a greater impact on the schedule. And we can't find a place to stop for the night.

We take directions, detours, get lost trying to find supposed hotels. None are found and we lose more time.

Go to next plan: drive through the night with the drivers doing a rota of two hours on and one hour off – to try and sleep on the floor on the back of the cab. So we batter on towards Istanbul and cross the Dardanelles in

almost total darkness.

In the gloom the only thing it is possible to distinguish are the hundreds of small mosques lit by either white light or green light. Their design appears to be based in Istanbul's world famous and beautiful 'blue mosque'. In the darkness it is possible to see hundreds of these little gems of beautiful architecture dotted all along our route.

At 5am we take a morning stop at a motorway service station for some coffee and a snack. We all look exhausted. How the drivers have kept going is astonishing, but we batter on.

Driving all night we get to Ankara in daylight. We are now deep in central Turkey and the road signs start to become more confusing.

Warnings

Exhausted and tired, we get lost for over an hour and then eventually find the road to Kirrikale which we make by late afternoon. We can either belt on or try to get some rest. Taking directions from a local we get lost

looking for a hotel and get on the wrong road heading in the wrong direction.

Hammering along a dusty road an amazing hotel is by the side of the road. It's the best we've seen on the journey and they have rooms. It appears to be run by the Turkish equivalent of the AA or RAC and is the cheapest place we have stayed so far. Stroke of luck.

The strongest drink we can get is the local black sweet tea.

The staff are very friendly, the food is good. Over some tea the locals give us directions to Diyarbakir in south east Turkey where we are to meet up with representatives of the Iraqi trade unions who will cross the border into Iraq with us.

They warn us to avoid travelling between the towns of Metalya to Diyarbakir in the hours of darkness. The Kurdish PKK are active and, they say, there is a significant Turkish Army presence. In the morning we're up at first light, breakfast, run through the checks, ensure we are

fuelled up, get on the main road at 6.45am heading for the next main town of Deyabesir, hit 60mph and stay at it. We need to batter on to make up some time.

Just south of Kirrikale we fall foul of the mobile speed cameras of the local police. We're very lucky they have only clocked us doing 18 kilometres an hour over the limit as just before this we were 70 kilometres an hour over the local limit.

It's a fair cop. The police are very polite and efficient. They check our Customs papers, charge a small on-the-spot fine for speeding and send us on our way. Our attempts at making up time have only led to a further delay we could ill afford.

Suitably, and deservedly chastised by the local police, we head on for Deyabesir which turns out to be a very major city. It is just after noon and we spot a garage where we can fuel up the pumps and have a quick bite to eat.

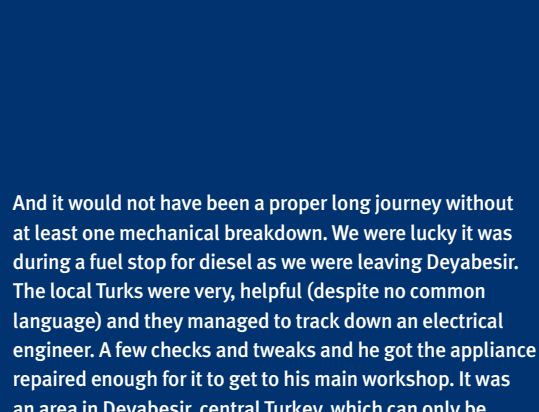
After refuelling, one appliance won't start. The local garage manager, frustrated that we are blocking off one of his fuel pumps, jumps in the cab and releases the air brake and now the appliance cannot even be towed for repairs by the other appliance. We are stuck.

The team is becoming very frustrated. We can't speak Turkish and they can't speak English. Nearly an hour goes by and we can't repair the fault although Phil, Mick and Norman have between them deduced it is electrical in nature rather than mechanical.

Phil Goalby dredges up some of his German and tries it on the locals. Contact! One of the local Turks has a friend who is an electrical engineer for Bosch and he will phone him on his mobile. He arrives with another mechanic, does his checks, gets the appliance started and takes it to his workshop with us following.

Garageland

None of us want to break down in the middle of nowhere. They do a thorough check at the workshop – in what appears to be Deyabesir's "garageland". During this time the call to prayer is broadcast from the local mosque but is rapidly and entirely drowned out by the wail of a fire appliance siren accidentally set off by a Turkish mechanic. I thank Allah it was not one of us. We take time out for a tea and coffee, made on the two-ring stove out of sight of the locals



And it would not have been a proper long journey without at least one mechanical breakdown. We were lucky it was during a fuel stop for diesel as we were leaving Deyabesir. The local Turks were very helpful (despite no common language) and they managed to track down an electrical engineer. A few checks and tweaks and he got the appliance repaired enough for it to get to his main workshop. It was an area in Deyabesir, central Turkey, which can only be described as "garageland", a part of town with what seemed like hundreds of garages with thousands of mechanics. It was a minor fault with the electrical relay which was rapidly efficiently repaired for \$98 dollars.



who are observing Ramadan and are fasting.

With a total of another hour and a half delay and 98 dollars lighter, we leave Deyabesir and head off on the road to Diyabakir which is where we are meant to be at the end of today. Outside of town the landscape starts to change dramatically.

Dangerous

Before long we are in beautiful mountainous desert. The steep climbs and the twisting roads slow us down even more. The good news is the electrical repair is holding up and the oil leak from the axle is manageable.

Parts of the road are becoming little more than sand tracks. By dusk we have made it to Metalya and we discuss what to do. Brian is keen to keep on and try and make up time and get us back on track. But there are also fresh warnings through Head Office that the route from Metalya to Diyabakir is dangerous at night.

We find a hotel for the night and settle down. The entrance to the hotel has a detector for finding explosives.

The call to afternoon prayer is totally drowned by the wail of our siren. I thank Allah it was not our fault

Perhaps the warnings were spot on. We agree to get up at first light and head off early. We must make Diyabakir then the Iraqi border the following day.

After five hours sleep we are off by 6am the following morning. A couple of miles out of town and we spot the first Turkish military control point but we are waved through without stopping. The landscape has changed again. It is now mountains and forests and lakes, similar to my native Scottish Highlands (except much warmer and without the midges).

All the major towns we have passed through in Turkey so far have an incredible amount of modern building work taking place. The evidence of modern flats, houses and new infrastructure going up is everywhere. It's like the whole place has been given the TV homes makeover treatment on a large scale.

We are making very good time on modern roads. Then just south of one

THE ROAD TO IRAQ

large lake there is one mountainous pass where the road runs through.

On this tight route I count over 20 mobile or fixed Turkish army checkpoints. Some have armoured cars, all are heavily armed and sandbagged. We are not stopped at any of them but they are stopping lots of cars.

A few miles through the pass and we start hitting villages in the predominantly Kurdish part of Turkey. This part of Turkey is very, very different. It is most certainly not on the regular tourist trail.

It looks starved of investment. Many of the homes look to be single room and of breezeblock construction with tin roofs and the roads are in poor condition. I have seen what potholes look like, but these – deep and large – are more akin to mining excavations.

Even the local mosques look run down. We see large scale use of donkey and cart as a means of transport. There is a significant Turkish military presence and there are regular mobile and permanent military checkpoints. Welcome to old-style Turkey, you're not going to have a nice day. No one is by the looks of it.

Having pressed on to Diyarbakir we meet up with Abdullah Muhsin, the international representative of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) and also the local driver and guide who will help get us down and into Iraq itself. The border is only three hours drive away and it is exciting to be so close to our destination.

Undercover

We had been up since 5am and had driven solidly for nearly six hours. At this rate we'd be over the border by 4pm, even with a lunch stop, and be a few hours into Iraq by nightfall, perhaps as far as Erbil.

If it had not been for the guide we'd have struggled to find our way through Diyarbakir and the road to the border. Maybe our luck has changed. It does, but not for the best. We stop at a garage about 12 miles north of the border which also has a little coffee shop. That's when they pounce.

A man described as an undercover police officer asks for our papers. He offers no ID himself and it might not be a good idea to start demanding it.

He calls a colleague on a mobile. When he arrives he declares our



This part of Turkey is starved of investment and most certainly not on the regular tourist trail. Left to right (main picture, foreground) Norman Breckenridge and Phil Goalby are briefed by Brian Joyce after the Turkish officials pounce



papers are wrong and says we'll not get through the border and we need to follow him to the next town. Maybe they will have to seize the fire appliances.

By the time we arrive in one of the dustiest and dirtiest towns with the worst pot-holed roads I have ever seen they have had a change of heart. With their invaluable assistance we might get over the border. We quickly realise they will want us to be grateful for their assistance. Perhaps very grateful.

Having photocopied our passports they lead us to the border, passing what seem like miles of parked trucks. Some drivers had clearly given up waiting and abandoned them to the desert.

At the border everyone appears to know the two as yet unidentified men who are our new friends. Staff working on the border shout greetings to them. Both have free

Officially, we have left Turkey. In reality we are being held in No Man's Land

access to secure areas and have no problems getting us through passport control. They both walk around as if they own the place.

We are now between Turkish passport control and Turkish Customs. None of us has been given our passports back and there's a problem with our papers. It all has a familiar ring to it and we wonder if they'll try the same scam.

And yes, they do. The team plus Abdullah Muhsin, who joined us in Diyarbakir, were stuck between Turkish passport control and Turkish Customs. We have driven close to 3,000 miles across 10 countries and we're 200 metres short of our objective.

They have taken our passports and there is no sign of the officials. The official documentation shows we left Turkey after we'd passed through the passport control. In short, we've officially left. In reality we are in a No Man's Land between passport control and Customs, being unable to go back and being stopped from going forward.

The Turks don't appear to be bothered by what bits of international law they might be breaking. Welcome to the new Turkey.

Having been through the same scam getting in, we're a bit wiser



and tougher with the officials. The fire appliances, we tell them, remain official UK-state property until they are handed over to the Iraqis. They are therefore illegally holding state property.

We show the official documents certifying the appliances are old and no longer used by the British fire service but which were being given in humanitarian aid to fire crews in Iraq. We are not part of a commercial venture to sell the appliances. There had been no problems, we explain, at any Customs point until we reached Turkey.

No explanation was given as to why we were being held. Exactly what was wrong with the papers? If there was something wrong then how did we get through in the first place with papers supplied by Turkish Customs and which had been inspected by the police? Where were our passports? Under what authority were we being held?

And the replies came back. The man who could help had gone off shift and was not in again until the following morning. That sounded very familiar. The new computer system had broken down. That one was new. They were doing what they could, but this was a difficult problem.

During team huddles to discuss the situation we took the view that all the problems would go away if we gave them enough money and our time was running out. Welcome to the new Turkey. Give us a bribe.

The appliances are parked up next to a new building being specifically built for Customs. We are on a building site for the night. There is nowhere to sleep, no toilet facilities and no washing facilities. There's nowhere to eat.

More worryingly, no one knows we are here. Officially we're not. The team formulate a plan to get the news out so people know what is happening and start putting pressure on. I phone BBC Radio who say they will be interested if we get held for much longer. They make a note in case we disappear. We each phone home and tell members of our family where we are, but they are not to worry.

Blocked

If we are still here by morning we'll make contact with the Union, MPs, the TUC and Government departments. No point troubling people now (it is Sunday evening) but we could be held here for several days and it may turn into a diplomatic incident with a team on a humani-

tarian mission to Iraq being blocked at the Turkish border.

The stove appears along with emergency food supplies and sleeping bags. Phil starts cooking; Norman and Mick start washing down the marble forecourt in front of the new Customs' building, dry it off and put flattened cardboard boxes on the newly cleaned area. We might be sleeping rough, but it will be clean.

At the same time Turkish officials confirm we are here for the night they warn us about the local "Ali Babas". We are warned this is a very dangerous area because of organised gangs of "Ali Babas" who would cut our throats as we slept to nick our valuables.

The same warning is given separately by a police patrol later on. The local gangs of "Ali Babas" start to look around the appliances, testing the shuttered compartments which have no locks. We appear to convince them that the high pressure hose is a flame thrower (it does look very gun like).

Then Customs officials try a late deal on us. They will give some of us our passports back and we can go over the border and stay in a hotel for the night. But Brian and Norman have to stay with the vehicles.

To their surprise we tell them to shove it. We have come all this way together and we will not be split up now. There is no way we're going to leave two colleagues with this lot to sleep rough in an area which is very dangerous. No one is prepared to leave.

So we all sleep rough for the night. Some on the sleeping bags on the cardboard, some in the cabs of the appliances. The local "Ali Babas" leave us alone and instead loot a pile of material from the new Customs building. It is not our problem so we don't feel the need to raise the alarm.

The downside is we're attacked all night by gangs of kamikaze mosquitoes. Their bites will take months to heal properly.

In the morning we prepare makeshift washing facilities and have breakfast. We're two hours ahead of the UK so I check in with the BBC Radio Today programme, telling them we are still being held.

We'll be a fallback story and they keep my mobile number. Having waited for a reasonable time we start to phone home contacting the FBU, the TUC, and the FBU Parliamentary group so they can start putting

pressure on.

By 11am Turkish time we are told that the right officials have been bribed, but there are still problems, (when we return to the UK we find that contact had been made very quickly with the Turkish Embassy in London).

Our two mysterious contacts demand 600 US dollars as the officials had been particularly greedy. We tell them we'll pay on our way back, but no more than \$500 US dollars.

We deeply resent paying the money, but we have the choice of paying up or abandoning the vehicles 200 metres short of our country of destination, never a serious option as far as all were concerned. There was also a clear indication that they had the power to seize and commandeer the appliances.

Released

By late morning we pass through customs, all experiencing a mixture of emotions. But all was not over yet. We still had the military controlled area and barrier to get through. These military have the bearing of professionals with one officer, who speaks excellent English and two privates.

As the officer checks our papers I start to get down from the cab to offer to open the shutters of the lockers. One of the privates makes eye-contact and moves his head almost imperceptibly from side to side. I ask with hand and face gestures whether I should stay in the cab and he nods, again imperceptibly.

The papers are checked and within a few minutes we were across the border. Turkish Customs had delayed us by seven hours coming in and another 19 hours getting out.

We were glad to see the back of the place. I text back to the office what now looks like a strange message but was how we felt at the time: "Now over the border. Safely in Iraq".

We are warmly met on the Iraqi Kurdistan side by the President of the Kurdistan Workers Syndicate Union Hangaw Abdullah Khan, accompanied by several of his officials. They knew where we had been from the previous day because they could see the fire appliances. They too had been making representations on our behalf. They had slept in chairs and on the floor at the Kurdish Customs offices overnight, hoping that we might be released.

We are taken to a small cafe while we wait to go through Customs on

BREAK FOR THE BORDER



Brian, Norman in sleeping bags on cardboard at the border. Abdullah Muhsin asleep in the back of a cab. In the morning Norman Breckenridge creates a makeshift bathroom and Brian Joyce makes the teas and coffees.

the Iraqi side. Within an hour and a half we are on the road to Duhok with a local firefighter in each appliance. Our own drivers, despite being exhausted, were determined that they would deliver the appliances to Duhok and only there hand them over.

This is the Kurdish region of the Iraqi Federation. It has been a UN-protected territory since 1991. Relative to the rest of Iraq, it is a haven of peace. The Iraqi insurgency has not made great inroads into the Kurdish region. They take precautions and there is a strong local Kurdish military presence rather than a UK or US presence. This is no Heart of Darkness or scene from Apocalypse Now. There is no Colonel Kurtz, mad or otherwise. Not here, not in the Kurdish Region of the Iraqi Federation.

As we pass through villages on the way to Duhok we see evidence of the UN-backed reconstruction which has been taking place since 1991. They are about 15 years ahead of the rest of Iraq and it is obvious the signs are promising. There are new schools, hospitals and universities. We pass a brand new college for training vets, paid for by the UN.

All around we can see evidence of a region still under construction. If there was a model for the rest of Iraq, then this is a strong candidate. There is also a stark reminder of Iraq's problems as we pass makeshift refugee camps. The poor who have fled the more southern parts of the Iraqi Federation have settled here in these camps. The richer refugees have fled to Jordan or Saudi Arabia, their preferred safe havens where they don't live in camps.

Hangaw was keen for us to get to a hotel and have the opportunity to wash, sleep and eat. Due to the various delays, but primarily those experienced in Turkey, time was now very much against us. The meetings arranged for the previous day with the governor, ministers and media had all been cancelled.

Erbil was still several hours away – we all knew that our journey was going to end here in Duhok. This was not an issue, Brian had always made it clear that Duhok could very well be where the handover took place and that any further travel would depend upon discussions with the Kurdish and Iraqi officials.

Those discussions would centre entirely on the safety and security



reports at that time. It was apparent that the roads to and town of Erbil were safe. However, the roads and situation after that was extremely dangerous and our safety could not be guaranteed. We would be travelling back the next morning. It would take a further two days to reach England.

On arrival at the hotel in Duhok, there was time for a quick shower to wash a few days of Turkish dust away, then back down stairs to the smell of hot food. As we sat several more officials arrived including Jalal-Najif Hassan the President of the KWSU in Duhok with his son and a few of his officials.

They greet us all, and there is extra warmth in their meeting and greeting Brian Joyce again. A formal meeting was to take place later, but for now we were enjoying the hospitality – non-alcoholic – of our hosts, attempting to explain our experiences and introduce the team through Mehdi, their young interpreter, or Abdullah Muhsin.

Disbelief

We handed the appliances over, Norman, Phil and Mick ensuring all the little quirks and problems were

The region is still under construction. This luxury furniture store is topped by a concrete skeleton on the first and second floors

well documented. One appliance would travel to Erbil, the other would go on to Baghdad. Both appliances had done incredibly well, over 3,000 miles of part tarmac, unkept mountain and dusty desert roads.

A few minor faults had occurred but we were sure, once rectified, the two appliances would continue in service for many years. Perkins had done a great job getting them in shape.

A large room in the hotel was to accommodate our meeting. There were some 26 officials of the KWSU present, many were presidents of their own unions covering transport, mechanics, engineers, building and construction workers as the KWSU is the equivalent of our TUC with various unions affiliating to it.

Hangaw spoke on behalf of the KWSU. He firstly apologised for the way we had been treated by the Turkish authorities and expressed their disappointment that we would not be able to spend more time with them due to the delays. He uttered disbelief that anyone would be prepared to do what we had done, yet he said that they should not be surprised, as it was the FBU that had undertaken the task. It was a practical task but also a monumental expression of solidarity and support, once again, for the people and firefighters of Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq.

Hangaw said that all the promises made by Brian on behalf of the FBU had been kept. He expressed their gratitude and need for the appliances and the prominent role they will play

The text to Head Office made sense at the time: 'Now over the border and safely in Iraq'

within a community just outside of Erbil.

He stressed how essential our continued support is for the trade union movement and the firefighters of his country. That the links of friendship between the KWSU and the FBU must never be broken and hoped would continue.

Further tributes were made by KWSU officials regarding the FBU's contribution and the timing of Brian's first visit which, they believed, was the first visit in 40 years of a union official from the UK.

Val Salmon addressed the meeting – followed by Brian – and gave an assurance that the FBU have not and will not forget the people of Iraqi Kurdistan or the people of Iraq. It would have been difficult not to have felt proud of the FBU at that moment, so clearly held in such esteem and respect by the members of the KWSU.

Internment

Phil, Norman and Mick also addressed the meeting, giving their thoughts on the importance of this act of solidarity to the local unions, fire service and the communities the appliances would serve. The fact is we could do so much more – they deserve so much more – but ask for nothing.

It was by now late evening, we were all tired and had to be up early the next morning to journey back to Diyabakir. Our hosts though had organised a meal.

Having eaten little more than dust for two days, it was a feast.

Phil, Norm and Mick met the local firefighters early the next morning and briefed them on the machines and operational equipment. While the others met and had a final meeting with Hangaw to discuss the issues and problems they were now facing.

We had hired two drivers and cars for the journey back. Farewells were made. All too quickly we arrived at the Turkish border and the first Customs check point which was run by the Turkish army, suggesting they may not have complete confidence in their Customs colleagues.

It was quick, efficient. The guard explained in perfect English: "I will carry out a search. If I find nothing you will be on your way. If I do find something you will be in trouble and you will not be on your way." Fair enough.

The cars were searched along



Turkish army conscripts with automatic weapons hold us at gun point, fingers on triggers

with our bags. After a further four checkpoints we were on to the open road. No money had changed hands; we had not seen our "friends" to pay them off. It all seemed so easy and far quicker than our exit from the country. The weather was hot, time to sit back and relax, although in the back of our minds we all knew we weren't out of Turkey yet.

Ten miles had passed and the drivers came to a stop in a small town. Surprise, surprise the same

chap who had stopped us on our way to the border appeared. Brian went and spoke to him, 600 dollars, please, as you agreed. Clearly Brian was not playing ball, the man produced a mobile and pushed it towards him, it was the main man from our internment at the border.

We all knew that we would have to pay, as we shared the suspicion that our journey would be coming to a sudden halt if we didn't, and if not there it would be later. Discussions over, 500 dollars became the figure again; Brian went to hand it to the man, "Cameras ready boys?" No, no you must give it to that boy over there, he pointed to a 12-year-old. Enough said, have a nice day!

No one wanted to part with any money, we all felt angry but we also believed it was the sensible choice. The team had come to a joint decision



Children crowd around as we hand over the appliances to local firefighters and later share a meal with trade union leaders

that we would pay. Perhaps it was worth the money just to get out of the country? Lovely people except for their Customs officials.

Still several hours to Diyarbakir, we all had our personal thoughts of the events since we drove on to Eurotunnel, but spirits were still good amongst us all.

At a mobile military spot check, we were pulled in off the road. Immediately three automatic weapons were being pointed at us.

Mick Henn, who had served in the British Army, was not impressed: "Young, nervous conscripts, automatic weapons pointing at us, safety catches off and fingers on triggers. I do not like this one bit."

A fourth soldier gestured for us to get out and checked our passports. The cars were searched, our rucksacks emptied onto the ground in front of

us, the contents kicked around.

Their automatic weapons pointing at us the whole time. The typical holidaymaker would not see this side of Turkey. We were stopped twice more, but arrived in Diyarbakir ready for an hour or two of sightseeing, or perhaps just a couple of cold beers. But first, time to pay the drivers, who strangely enough wanted more than the agreed price made with Abdullah who was still in Duhok.

Hijacked

Abdullah had also made the hotel arrangements, booked the rooms and said: "Just say my name." Of course the receptionist looked blankly and informed us he had no rooms booked for us. But there were vacant rooms, so problem solved, again! Then we watch the TV screen in reception and see a Turkish plane

has been hijacked and all flights are grounded. We phone home to confirm to our families that it is not ours.

The next morning, showered and refreshed we headed for the airport (everything back on schedule) and an internal flight to Istanbul. From there a flight back to Heathrow with our own personal memories.

Back to home and our safety. But remembering we had left Iraq only hours before. There homes and families being savagely torn apart, people kidnapped, horrifically tortured and executed.

Union officials who are being kidnapped and executed for their beliefs. Murdered because they believe – and are willing to fight and die for – democracy and the freedom to speak up for what they believe. Only five hours flying time away.

THE TEAM ON A JOURNEY

The journey involved travelling 3,000 miles through 11 countries in 10 days. Three drivers – Phil Goalby, Norman Breckenridge and Mick Henn – worked a shift system of two drivers on, one driver off.

All three are from the West Midlands. Phil Goalby is a recently retired firefighter and FBU official. Norman Breckenridge has been retired for a few more years and is also a former FBU official. Mick Henn is an FBU official and a serving firefighter from Halesowen station, West Midlands.

Adrian Clarke from Cambridgeshire helped obtain the appliances and equipment and was meant to join the trip. He was taken seriously ill and missed it.

Dave Green, EC member East Midlands was meant to be the fourth driver. The trip clashed with the dates given for the High Court hearing on the Notts and Lincs co-responding case. Dave was needed for the final preparations for the case and missed the trip.

Brian Joyce is recently retired as the long-serving Executive Council member for the South West. Val Salmon, from Greater Manchester, was the EC member representing control staff until recently. Duncan Milligan is the FBU's Head of Research and Communications and was the one with the camera and the notebook.

Phil, Norman and Mick drove 2,000 miles each in 10 days over roads which ranged from the perfect tarmac of a dull northern Europe to the poorer hot and dusty roads of eastern Turkey. The terrain ranged from the very flat to mountainous desert roads.

Each day they carried out the morning ritual of detailed checks on the appliances. It was these detailed checks that helped nurse one of the appliances over 3,000 miles with a slight oil leak on one axle.

Val Salmon said: "For one reason or another this team had not met up as a group before but gelled very quickly. The journey was difficult for everyone but the drivers are the ones who really pulled out all the stops.

"Phil, Norman and Mick just kept going, which was an incredible feat, especially in the last leg through Turkey. Given the pressure we were all under from the first crossing into Turkey it was remarkable that we didn't all end up having a row.

"No-one was getting paid for this, we were all volunteers. We did it because it was an important message to send our colleagues in Iraq.

"It was a symbolic and practical gesture which shows them that the world hasn't forgotten them. We'll do all we can to help them serve their communities and get some proper independent unions in place to protect themselves."

We thank all those listed below, who are not in any particular order, but without whom our journey would not have been possible.

- Perkins for their invaluable assistance in preparing the appliances
- FBU Regions 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13
- Adrian Clarke (FBU Cambridgeshire)
- Tom Carroll (CFO Cambridgeshire)
- Barry Dixon (CFO, GMC)
- Ernie Thornton (FBU EC member, south east)
- Andy Gilchrist (former general secretary, on behalf of the FBU)
- Chris Woods (FBU West Midlands region)
- Matt Wrack (general secretary, on behalf of the FBU)
- EuroTunnel
- Thompsons Solicitors
- Hard Dowdy Accountants
- Transport and General Workers Union
- Community, The Union For Life
- Harbour Shipping
- British Chambers of Commerce
- National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers
- Public and Commercial Services Union
- Members of Manchester Emergency Fire Control
- Officials and members of Cambridgeshire FBU
- And our families for putting up with our absence.

