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Unwelcome: British SAS Bumbled Into, and Back Out of, East Libya

By Jason Ditz

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Underscoring the importance of calling ahead for reservations, Britain's SAS unit, dispatched to East Libya over the weekend with a low-ranking diplomat, are returning to Britain today by way of the [HMS Cumberland, an aging frigate which was being used to evacuate foreign nationals from Libya](#) and which now has some surprisingly high profile passengers.



The troops arrived pre-dawn on Friday, making a surprisingly conspicuous landing some 20 miles outside of Benghazi – a landing which drew immediate warning shots. Within short order

the troops, who were in plain clothes so as not to “attract attention,” stood out so bad that they were captured by a local militia loyal to the rebels who demanded to know who they were.

That’s when the [excuses started, as the troops insisted that they were unarmed and the diplomat said they were looking for a hotel. The first claim was an extremely unwise one, as it turned out the troops were armed to the teeth, and also had explosive caches with them for some reason.](#) This riled up the militia, who turned them over to the rebel leadership.

Which probably didn’t seem like that big of a deal – after all, the diplomat was supposed to make contact with the rebel leadership. But after a solid week of warnings from the rebels against foreign military intervention, the unannounced arrival of the heavily armed unit wasn’t greeted with nearly the welcome they hoped, and the [entire unit found itself locked](#) in a military brig [until their expulsion earlier today.](#)

Ultimately the rebels, which are basically the de facto government of Eastern Libya at this point, would likely have welcomed an offer of diplomatic contact. They were annoyed at the unscheduled arrival and infuriated by the armed troops roaming around their capital city’s outskirts, an understandable position.

Or at least understandable to everyone except British officials, who still seem not to understand what went wrong. Some of the officials talked about the rebels “trying to make a point,” but with Foreign Secretary William Hague suggesting another team would be dispatched to Benghazi “in due course,” it is a point that apparently was lost of them.