

**These refugees are desperate to make it from Calais to Britain. Their perilous journey has taken them across two continents**

## **The promised land**



Many of them, like this man, are willing to risk their lives in

the cold waters of the Channel in the hope of a new beginning



*Alex Hannaford* tells their story. Photographs by *Jez Coulson*

B

etween the cross-channel ferry terminal and the beach at Calais, with its wooden huts and seafront restaurants serving tourists moules-frites, an inlet curls around the back of the decaying ramparts besieged by Edward III in the mid-1300s. As the sun disappears, you can see fishing boats at anchor, bobbing in the harbour of the Quai de la Colonne. Straight ahead, across the water, a line of lorries snakes its way under an illuminated “Calais 5” sign into the bowels of a ferry bound for Dover, smoke spurting from its funnel before dissipating in the evening air.

It’s just before 8pm and a lone figure appears at the edge of the jetty. Mohammed Al Damgha is a migrant from Damascus, Syria. Just 21, he has been on an arduous journey through Lebanon, Turkey, Greece and Italy to reach this point. Now he wants to cross the Channel. Back in Syria he worked for a software company, before the Arab Spring spiralled into a full-blown civil war. Al Damgha’s brother died in the conflict.

Since arriving in Calais a few months ago, he’s been sleeping rough in the doorway of a church, just a short walk from here, along with other Syrian refugees. He says he has tried maybe 100 times to climb on to the underbelly of a lorry bound for Britain — to force himself between the back wheels as it slows down at a stop sign, and then cling on to the chassis with all his strength as the vehicle speeds to the ferry port. Every time, the French police have caught him. “Some are OK,” he tells me. “Others punch you.” A few weeks ago he suffered a broken nose and was in excruciating pain for five days. The truckers, too, give no quarter: there is a £2,000 fine for drivers who unwittingly carry an illegal immigrant.

Al Damgha looks desperate. He stares at a rusty ladder that descends into the black water below the quay. Tonight, he says, he’ll climb down and swim across the harbour, scale a ladder on the other side of Quai de la Colonne, then sneak under one of the lorries and stow away in its undercarriage until he arrives in Britain.

Across the inlet, the trucks have already passed security. Guards there are few, because the sea is regarded as an impenetrable moat. The tidal flows of the Channel are some of the

most dangerous in the world. The wind has picked up and the low hum of a ferry leaving port in the distance breaks the silence. It begins to rain; Al Damgha pulls the collar of his jacket up to his ears against the chill. The photographer and I offer to buy him a meal to dissuade him from risking his life in the cold waters of the Channel. He knows other people have died trying.

“You do not understand,” he says, raising his voice. “I can’t sleep here another night.”

There are an estimated 2,000 migrants in Calais today, living in makeshift refugee camps a stone’s throw from the ferry terminal — an increase, according to the French, of about 50% on last year. Figures in July showed the number of illegal migrants arrested as they attempted to get into Britain from Calais had doubled to more than 7,000 in just six months.

The British government last month pledged £12m to help the French authorities deal with the problem — money earmarked for fencing, added security and technology to detect migrants stowing away in and under lorries. Yet each day brings more arrivals.

One Calais charity worker says migrants think Britain is a paradise: if it’s so difficult to get there, it must be good. “We love Britain, we love England, it’s the best country,” several migrants told me. Traffickers take advantage of this, charging thousands of dollars for the final leg of the journey across the Channel, for those who can pay.

Language is one of the reasons Britain is so appealing. Most migrants, like Al Damgha, speak at least some English. They also believe that there are more opportunities to study and find a job on the black market without papers. In France, if you employ an illegal alien you risk criminal penalties up to €15,000 (£12,000) and a five-year jail sentence. In the UK, you can be fined up to £20,000, but it’s a civil penalty. Like most EU member states, France has a national ID card system. Britain

doesn’t, so immigration regulations are difficult to enforce here. “We tend to play by the rules,” a spokesman for the Home Office says, while many refugee charities suggest that migrants arriving in France are routinely treated like criminals.

There is also the possibility of claiming asylum in the UK. John Campbell, an expert in immigration at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, says that if a migrant, who has been processed in Italy is arrested in France, he will likely be returned to Italy for their asylum application to be processed there. “There is no money, no resources for you [in Italy]. The best you’re going to get is a one-year residence permit, with no right to work. And there’s a lot of racial discrimination down there. A lot of confrontation.”

Even so, the continent’s porous borders and proximity to Africa and the Middle East ensure that France, Germany and Italy receive many more applications for asylum than Britain. But tales of the relative paradise here are drawing more and more migrants to Calais.

A year ago, it was down these same rusty steps at the Quai de la Colonne that Robiel Habtom, a 24-year-old Eritrean, who had escaped the bloodshed of his home country, descended. What Robiel didn’t know, as he cast himself out into the cold water that night to swim the 200 yards or so to the ferry port on the other side, was that the tide was going out, the wind had whipped up in the port and that he’d never make it across. Robiel struggled for 20 minutes before succumbing to the cold and the current. Police divers found his body a month later.

I learnt of his name and his fate from various African and Italian blogging sites — and came to Calais in search of his story. As tragic and senseless as Robiel’s death was, his journey from Eritrea, through Sudan, across the Sahara to Libya and across the Mediterranean to Italy — a three-month →



**SIGN OF THE TIMES**  
Conflicting graffiti on a road sign outside Calais, where around 2,000 migrants are camping out

ordeal that involved people-traffickers, imprisonment, hunger, thirst and fear — is one shared by thousands of men, women and children desperate to escape the hardships and dangers of their homelands. We rarely have any idea who these people are, we don't hear their stories and we don't learn of the fateful odysseys on which they've embarked.

Robiel was still a child when his father, Habtom, a soldier, died during the war with Ethiopia. After the country gained its independence, his mother, Zigheweini, moved Robiel and his brother, Filmon, and sister, Selam, to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. The family was poor, but relatively well educated. They didn't stay long. Afraid that she would lose both her sons if they joined the army, the family moved to Sudan and into a refugee camp, but Robiel was detained at the border and imprisoned for two years.

When he was released, he again attempted to rejoin his family in Sudan — and this time he was successful. Thousands of men like him cross from Eritrea every year to escape conscription. Officially, conscripts only have to serve 18 months. In reality, many never leave the army. Eritrea is one of the few countries from which residents need an exit visa.

According to Dr Campbell, "There's no rule of law in Eritrea. In excess of 10,000 people are kept in prisons across the country — including in metal containers and underground chambers. If you're deported back to Eritrea, they'll interrogate you, find out you were called up for national service and escaped across the border without an exit visa, and then you'll be compelled to enter the military. If you refuse you are detained indefinitely."

Despite Robiel's ordeal, friends say he never lost his humour. Wedi Fсахaye, his best friend, told me Robiel loved Elvis Presley and could sing every song. On his Facebook page Robiel commented that he loved the books of the British author Ken Follett. His family said that he liked to read a lot of history.

While he was in Sudan he met Melat, an Ethiopian girl. After just a few weeks the pair decided they would one day marry, and they talked about having children. Melat, 25, now lives in Rome after seeking asylum in Italy, and talked to me one afternoon by phone.

She says that when they met, Robiel had found work in an office, earning money to support his family. "We planned to go to Italy together," she says. "Robiel was very smart. He had a good brain and wanted to study history — he knew more about my country's history than I did — but he couldn't do that



**LEST WE FORGET**  
A migrant holds a picture of Robiel Habtom, a 24-year-old Eritrean who drowned trying to swim across the port at Calais to stow away to Britain

in Eritrea. He wanted to go to Europe to work and study and eventually bring his mother and his brother and sister."

The couple paid traffickers to take them across the Sahara into Libya. Melat says she paid \$1,200 (£750) "for a place on a construction truck with 125 people squeezed in. We didn't have food, only a little water, and we couldn't sleep. It was very dangerous."

"But," she says, "Nobody died on our truck, so I thought everything would be OK. You feel hungry and tired; it was difficult. But it would be OK. We had a plan," Melat tells me, choking back tears. "He made me a ring out of bronze."

It took a week for them to cross the Sahara. During the drive they witnessed an accident on the road in front of them — the injured were left to die in the desert with no water or food. In Libya, Robiel was imprisoned for a month, during which time he was tortured, and detained in a room with 200 other people — "like animals, with little water and one or two slices of bread each day". Eventually, he was forced to pay his captors to be released, according to his aunt.

Robiel's sister lent him a further \$2,000 (£1,255) to pay traffickers to take him by boat to Italy: he spent three days at sea, squeezed into an open-top wooden craft with 200 other people, no food and very little water. Approaching the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, he and Melat were picked up by the Italian navy and detained for five hours, after which they were fingerprinted and dropped off at a detention centre in Sicily.

Robiel's aunt, Roberta Mazzeo, moved to Italy from Eritrea when she was 18. Her daughter Monica, an EU citizen, lives in London. We meet at a cafe near Victoria station one morning in September, when Roberta is visiting her daughter. When I ask Roberta what her nephew was like, she begins to cry. "He was like a normal 25-year-old guy," she says. "He had a lot of dreams."

She says Robiel would play with her youngest daughter, Georgia, 11, who sits at the end of the table in the cafe wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt and a big smile. He'd spend hours reading books, chatting to friends from Sudan, Libya and Eritrea on Facebook. And he'd call Melat for hours, planning their future together. Robiel asked Roberta if he could stay with her in Italy, if she could help him to find a job. "We tried so hard to find one for him, but it was impossible and he decided to move," she says.

He stayed in Italy for five months before Roberta agreed to buy him a plane ticket from Bologna to Paris. He told her he had friends in France and a better chance of finding work. On the morning of October 9, he called Melat. "He told me he was going to England," she says. "He told me to be strong, that he was always with me and that after one month he'd either come back or he'll have found work there and would find a way for me to join him."

That afternoon he telephoned his aunt. "He said everything was fine," Roberta says, "that he had travelled to Calais and a lot of people were there, waiting to move to London. He didn't tell me how he was going to try to get to the UK, but he said his big dream was to help his brother and mother to get from Sudan to London and to enjoy a life with him. He wanted to work and was thinking about studying, too."

Two hours later, Robiel was dead. A friend, who planned to swim across after Robiel, but had instead seen him disappear into the»→

**In Libya, Robiel was imprisoned for a month. He was tortured and detained in a room with 200 people — "like animals, with little water"**

water, called Roberta the following day to tell her he had drowned. Roberta wrote to the French embassy in Rome and the Italian embassy in France asking for help. Only then, she says, did the authorities in Calais begin looking for Robiel's body. It would be a month before she'd discover that he had died carrying just a plastic bag containing some money, clothes, and a picture of his family.

"When I went to Calais [to collect his body] I saw a lot of guys like Robiel," Roberta says. "And there were women there with kids. An animal probably has a better life than the people who are there. They live in tents. They get sick because it's so cold in the winter. They don't have enough food, no medicine. The authorities really don't care."

She was accompanied by her friend Cornelia Toelgyes, an Italian human rights activist. "It was very hard for Roberta to hear how Robiel suffered... We didn't see the body because he was in a terrible condition, but he had some tattoos so they were able to identify him from the pictures," Toelgyes tells me. "It was the right decision not to show us the body — I found some humanity in that act."

Roberta wanted to bury Robiel in Italy. There was a raft of paperwork, but eventually Robiel's remains were repatriated. "If you die without a name you die twice," Toelgyes says. "It's important always to identify the dead."

Melat says that when she found out what had happened to her fiancé she wanted to end her own life. She couldn't speak to her family for weeks. "Robiel was my friend, my everything," she tells me.

On Calais's Rue de la Garenne, a mile or so from the busy ferry port, Christian Salomé walks along the railway line until he reaches a hole in the wire fence that runs parallel to it. A softly spoken, grey-haired man with glasses, Salomé used to work for Eurotunnel but when he retired he couldn't stop thinking about the Bosnian refugees he'd seen in the early 1990s trying to make their way to England, and wanted to do something to help. Five years ago, along with his wife, Marie, and some friends, he started Auberge des Migrants, a charity that helps migrants with food, tents and basic welfare.

Van-loads of CRS police — the French riot squads — sit waiting at every intersection and groups of migrants from all over sub-Saharan Africa gather at stop signs, waiting to clamber under a passing lorry; others disappear behind the fence to the encampment that has been their home for months.

Salomé leads me through the hole in the fence and into the camp — an empty warehouse and acres of grassland and scrub, owned by a factory that has turned a blind eye to its occupants. There's a strong smell of smoke, cooking and urine. Migrants carry pallettes of wood and tents after security guards moved them on from another part of the estate earlier this morning. Others play football in a field while, beyond, two police

## By a stream I watch a teenager scrub his cotton jacket meticulously with soap and water. He's still there when I walk past an hour later

officers monitor the camp from a hill. One migrant catches my eye and smiles. "My home, my home," he says, shooting an upwards glance to the tent on his back.

Salomé tells me they bathe in warm waste water from a nearby factory overflow pipe. By a stream I watch a teenager spread out a sheet of polythene, lay his cotton jacket on top, and scrub it meticulously with soap and water from the stream. He's still there when I walk past an hour later.

Ahmed Ali, 29, left Eritrea some months ago via the same route as Robiel. He says it took him seven days to get from Khartoum to the Libyan coast, holding on to the chassis of a lorry. "When we arrived we took a small boat to Italy." People pay anywhere between £1,000 and £1,500 to get from Sudan to Italy. On the boat, he says, the Libyan traffickers don't allow migrants to carry much water or food because of the weight. And they take everything — your money, your phone.

Ali tells me that during his journey he saw two Somalis succumb to dehydration and one Eritrean man fall into a diabetic coma. "When we told the Libyan driver, he said 'f\*\*\* you, let him die.'"

"We're not criminals," he says. "We are innocent people. We have left our country for a simple reason: if you want to take a petal from a flower, but you find a snake within the plant, you can't take the petal. Our country is like that. When the sun sets, everything is in shadow. My country is in the shadows all the time. Every day is dangerous."

Filmon Haile, another Eritrean who looks older than his 29 years, tells me he spent four days in a truck crossing the Sahara, sandwiched in with 118 people. "There was no space. You have to stand. The driver hardly stops and you're moving for 16 to 18 hours a day."

I ask how they endure the journey without food and with little water. "You're unable to talk. You're too exhausted," he says. "Some people are sick. I saw people collapse in the truck. Most of us sing in our heads," he says. "This is our dream, our ambition. And it's the dream that gets you through."

Two other men, Mubarak Babiker, 23, and his friend Aidara Abdumaget, 25, both from Darfur, spent 15 days on a boat crossing the Mediterranean to Italy. After two days the food ran out and the boat lost its way. People were panicking, they said. But, miraculously, it made it to the coast and nobody died.

Now, in Calais, long after the sun has set, seagulls bob on the water in the darkness. It's windy and the waves below the jetty are ink black and uninviting. On the other side of the harbour — the same harbour Robiel tried so desperately to reach — lorries roll into the hull of a ferry: Norbert Dentressangle, DSV, LKW Walter, PREAN, Aquilla, MAW, ECS...

Around midnight I visit the church doorway where 14 Syrians huddle together in sleeping bags or under dirty blankets pulled from rubbish bins. Mohammed Al Damgha isn't among them ■



**CAMP LIMBO**  
Migrants living on industrial land near Calais, where they wash in the waste water of a factory