



Press Statement

Of Peter Faulding Specialist Group International (SGI) in relation to the College of Policing review of Lancashire Constabulary into the disappearance of Nicola Bulley.

***Warning: graphic descriptions are included in this statement**

Begins

I would like to begin with saying that my thoughts remain with the family and friends of Nicola Bulley at this very difficult time.

This statement has been made in response to the release of the College of Policing review of Lancashire Constabulary into the disappearance of Nicola Bulley.

The reasons for this statement are to reveal the full truth about my search, answering some of the vital outstanding questions in this case and to protect and rebuild the excellent professional reputation that underpins who I am as person and my highly regarded company, Specialist Group International (SGI).

Experience

I have successfully been conducting forensic search operations, locating human remains and evidence on land and underwater since 1999. At that time, I pioneered the use of side scan sonar in the UK to search for missing persons and evidence underwater. I worked closely with the then Police National Police Search Adviser Professor Mark Harrison MBE and carried out extensive trials with equipment brought in from the United States and as a result, in 2001 became a registered expert on the National Crime Agency database (then the National Operations Faculty).

Since then, I have been brought in by police forces across the UK to assist on some of the most high-profile cases. I have advised UK and international police forces including the FBI in Quantico, Virginia and have been a guest of the US Secret Service in Washington DC. My work is highly referenced. I am a leader the field in underwater forensic search and recovery across the UK and the Specialist Group International (SGI) Underwater Dive team has been the official dive team

for police forces in Surrey, Sussex, Thames Valley, Kent, Essex and Hampshire and have located and recovered items of evidence and the bodies of many missing persons over the years, bringing relief, dignity and closure to their devastated families. The SGI underwater search team have proven competence levels, are fully vetted, insured and approved by the Health and Safety Executive. The team have undertaken highly confidential sensitive work for many years for government bodies including HMRC and police forces across the UK. As SGI is well known and highly regarded with an established success rate, the majority of search work that SGI undertakes is procured directly via independent county police forces and other agencies and not through the National Crime Agency.

My team and I pride ourselves by always acting with honesty, integrity, dignity and professionalism in all aspects of our work, especially when assisting the police and families who have lost loved ones.

Monday 6th February 2023

The SGI underwater search team and I arrived in St Michaels on Wyre to assist in the search for Nicola Bulley. The river had already been searched for many days by police divers from the North West Underwater Search Unit (NWUSU) and using their side scan sonar with no sign of Nicola.

We were initially tasked by Lancashire Police to search the tidal section of the River Wyre from the weir down to Cartford Bridge 3.57 miles downriver. The area was searched thoroughly using 1800kHz side scan sonar. No significant targets or any sign of Nicola were found.

Tuesday 7th February 2023

We were tasked to searched in the non-tidal section of the River Wyre above the weir in an area I would class as the 'hot zone'. This is the area in front of the bench down to the weir. From experience, if Nicola had entered the water here, this is the area where she would most likely be found.

My team and I commenced the search at 10.28am and 6 minutes later, at 10.34am, I identified a significant target that appeared, from my experience, to take human form. This target was approximately 75 metres downstream from the bench, just south of the island in the river.

At 10.53am, I notified the Lancashire Police Search Adviser of my findings by telephone. I also sent an image of the target on WhatsApp and requested that we put our SGI divers in the water immediately to check the area. My request to dive the target was refused and I was told that the North West Underwater Search Unit (NWUSU) would conduct the dive that afternoon.

Later, the NWUSU advised us that the target was found to be 'nothing'. This baffled me deeply as I am not usually wrong when I locate a target, especially a body that shows a clear signature. Sonar shadows cannot be created by 'nothing'. At 16.30pm that day, we discreetly rescanned the same area which showed the same target in the same location.

Having worked closely with police and police dive teams for many years, I had nothing but respect for them and instinctive trust in their ability and had no reason to doubt their findings. Although I thought I had found a very credible target, I conceded that maybe I was wrong and later that afternoon I made a statement to the media saying that there was no sign of Nicola and that I did not think she was in the river. At this point I had searched many miles of the river and the only target that I located was deemed to be negative by police divers.

Wednesday 8th February 2023

The following morning, I made a request to the Lancashire Police Search Adviser that we re-scan the same area that the target was located. My request was refused, being told once again the target area was clear. Having thoroughly searched the parts of the river that we were tasked with and with no other targets found, I made the decision leave the search. After leaving the scene I had no further contact with Lancashire Constabulary, unusually they made no request for our search records or sonar data.

Leading up to the inquest and the revelation

In preparation for the inquest which I assumed I would be invited to, I revisited, analysed and enhanced every sonar file recorded during my two-day search and particularly from 7th February. It became clear when enhancing the images with the sonar software tools that the target which I had located was without a doubt Nicola. I had in fact found Nicola at 10.34am on 7th February 2023 after just 6 minutes of searching. The enhanced sonar file taken at 16.30pm on 7th February 2023 clearly shows Nicola's body lying in a foetal position on her right side, legs bent.

I would have presented my findings and evidence at the Coroner's Inquest, however, I was not invited to it. My next opportunity would be to present the findings to the College of Policing review team.

Tuesday 5th September 2023

I was asked to attend the College of Policing review meeting where I was asked a total of 4 times to sign an NDA, which I refused. Although I had no intention of releasing any information before the report was published, I did not want to put myself in a position where I would be unable to publicly tell the facts of the

search in the future or disclose to the Coroner if requested. The many questions for me primarily covered my engagement with the media and did not ask about the details of my search operation at all. However, I used this as an opportunity to reveal my findings and showed the officers the first image of the target, showing the symmetrical shadows taken at 1034am on the 7th and briefly showed the supporting live sonar data. However, the meeting had to be cut short due to the meeting room only being booked for two hours. I advised them verbally and subsequently in writing that more information, including viewing the live sonar data, can be arranged.

At the same time, His Majesty's Coroner Dr James Adeley was sent a copy of the same information with a cover letter by recorded delivery showing the sonar targets an offering to meet him in person to show the data. I have never received an acknowledgement or reply from him.

After the College of Policing Interview

Following the College of Policing interview, no request was made to view the live sonar data or discuss my findings in more detail. Concerned that no further information request was made, on 27th October 2023, I sent a second detailed letter to the College of Policing offering more information.

The letter included the exact location of the target marked with the latitude and longitude on Google Maps and further enhanced, clear images of Nicola's body lying on her right side in a foetal position. The length of body parts accurately measures to a person of approximately 1.61 metres, the same height as Nicola.

I explained that although these images are clear enough to see, the live sonar data offers the clearest view and provides the ability to measure the target and confirm the exact size. The offer to provide and explain the sonar data was made once again. I also strongly implored the review team to sensitively disclose my findings to the family as this will be very distressing for them.

I received a response from the College of Policing on 2nd November 2023 stating: 'The Review Team checked with the Search Team at Lancashire Constabulary. They acknowledged that they had received this information from you and undertook a search in the area of the sonar images. They found nothing there. The Review Team also sought advice from government and academic experts. Their views are articulated in different ways and the conclusion of all those views is that the images you provided are of low certainty to be a human body'.

Page 105 of the report reveals that the government sonar specialist was only shown the initial image provided to the review team, taken at 1034am and not any of the enhanced images. Page 106 of the report reveals that it was only after

I provided further images and expressed my concerns that a thorough investigation was not being done that an opinion was sought from a lecturer at Cranfield University who states 'The target cannot be positively identified as a human body based on the data presented'.

Considering the very high-profile nature of this case, I am surprised that I was not asked to discuss the images with the academic experts or take them through my irrefutable sonar data. To confirm a sonar target, the live data must be viewed using the sonar software that the data was recorded on. The software can provide the following: time and date stamp, length of a target, height of a target measuring the shadows, the exact position in latitude and longitude (+/- 5 metres for GPS fluctuation and tow fish layback). The target can also be enhanced by using a range of colour palates, shadow reversal and raw data. Simply looking at a PDF image is not enough to come to a conclusion, similar to a hospital sonographer viewing an ultrasound.

I would ask how much practical experience these experts have in using high frequency sonar for forensic search in locating human remains underwater and what criteria they used to assess the images and make their conclusions. The lecturer could not confirm or deny the target with the limited information provided. I remain certain this target is Nicola and would welcome the opportunity to discuss my findings with these experts as soon as possible.

The police dive team confirmed to the review team that they found nothing when investigating my target, however, page 105 of the report states they found only 'tree branches underwater'. This is an obvious discrepancy from the original 'nothing' narrative and after 25 years of underwater search using the sonar, I know the difference between what tree branches and human bodies look like. I would be interested to compare their sonar data with mine, as the report says their images and coordinates match exactly yet neither expert opinion above considered the image to be tree branches.

How did Nicola end up in her final resting place on 19th February 2023.

Closer to the date when Nicola was found, decomposition gases inside her body built up enough to float her to the surface. Probably under the cover of the winter darkness, Nicola would have floated down the river and over the weir and into the tidal section of the river where eventually she was deposited in her final resting place on a rising or falling tide. My theory is supported on page 31-32 of the report by an independent expert:

'From the tidal information and the predictions by experts, it was anticipated that the weekend of 18-19 February might become significant in the search to find Nicola. Resources and tactics were planned for a large-scale search on the

afternoon of 19 February, as the tide ebbed. Sunday 19 February was also the first high tide since Nicola's disappearance, with 20 cubic metres of water per second moving over the weir. This predicted tidal movement would likely contribute to a floating body on the surface, moving with the tide. The challenges of searching in water prevented Nicola from being rapidly located and recovered. When Nicola was finally recovered, she had been caught by underwater branches of a tree while being transported back out by the recorded ebbing tide. There were no reeds in that section of the river.'

Release of the images and live sonar data

For ethical reasons and out of respect for the family, I will not be releasing any images or live sonar data to members of the public.

Going forward

This case has highlighted the need for a national co-ordinated response to missing persons, to ensure the best resources, technical equipment and expertise are deployed early for a swift resolution.

Specialist underwater search is under resourced in the UK and there is a lack of expertise county by county. The report recognises the requirement for police dive teams to actively accept assistance from commercial partners who have advanced technology and equipment to locate missing persons.

Response to report conclusions

There are several statements in the report which do not reflect the actual events:

- On page 100 it states that a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) was signed by Peter Faulding on the 6th February. This is untrue, I never signed an NDA , nor was I ever asked to sign one or ever discussed. I only signed a form agreeing to being responsible for my own health and safety and risk assessments but was not provided a copy of this. I take confidentiality very seriously and would never breach an NDA or disclose any confidential or protectively marked material. The only instructions I was given was to use discretion and keep operational information confidential. I was never given any operational information and never disclosed any (ie: location of a significant target). If at any time I was asked to stop updating the media, I would have immediately, but no request was ever made.
- On page 101 it states that the silver commander (an unnamed chief inspector) was directed to meet with me and discuss the handling of the

press and that this duty was discharged. I do not remember this ever occurring, I never met the silver commander or any other senior officers throughout my deployment of the 6th to the 8th of February. I would always comply with any instruction given to me. At no time was I ever briefed or advised specifically not to speak to the media. Failings by the police to control the media left me in a situation where I was swarmed for information.

- On page 101/ 102 it states that I 'requested a photo opportunity to take place at the scene with a member of the chief officer team, the family and myself'. This is a gross misrepresentation of the facts; I never requested a photo opportunity but advised police that a media statement needed to be put out which was supported by Paul Ansell who was also pleading with police to widen the search to the local area including the outbuildings in the village.
- On page 29 it states that 'searches continued with SGI on the 8th and 9th of February by licenced search officers supported by SGI', this is not true - SGI left the scene on the 8th February.
- Specialist Group International (SGI) have been utilised by the police on many high-profile search operations for many years and have located evidence and human remains. SGI are highly regarded and not simply a commercial diving company as described throughout the report. SGI have more technologically advanced equipment and expertise in this field. The report says we have the same equipment as the dive team, which is untrue, the SGI sonar is 1800kHz, the highest frequency available.

Thank you

I would like to say thank you to everyone who has supported myself and my fantastic team throughout this time, never doubting our credentials and abilities. Specialist Group International (SGI) continue to be available to help families who have lost loved ones, working closely with police, emergency services and volunteer teams across the UK.

I will make no further comment.