

Escape from Libya

by Francis Chan

Boustead exec's harrowing tale of violence, suspense and a scramble to safety

THEY thought they were dead. The country was ablaze, violent protests were raging through the streets and wolfpacks of armed looters were on the loose.

It was a terrifying night as the revolution in the Arab world hit home for a group of Singaporeans based in Libya.

Their frightening experience – the violent robberies, beatings and desperation to get on a plane out of the escalating crisis – seems more suited for action heroes in a Hollywood film than a bunch of guys on a run-of-the-mill construction job.

In fact, Hollywood would struggle to do justice to the nightmare the team from Boustead Infrastructures endured in Libya, not to mention the nerve-racking escape they managed to pull off.

Even now, two weeks after that great escape, finance manager Foo Chuan Jin is still trying to get his head around the way their world suddenly caved in.

The 38-year-old, slightly-built bachelor who grew up in Woodlands, told The Straits Times: "Everything fell apart so fast ... One day it was peace, then the next day I was in a war zone."

Mr Foo and his colleagues were based in Al Marj, a small city in the north-east, where they had been working on a township building project since July 2007.

Boustead Infrastructures is a unit of local engineering firm Boustead Singapore, which had one of the largest operations among Singapore-based companies in Libya at the time. The firm was responsible for 31 people in Libya: Nine were Singaporeans, and 10 Malaysians.

The rest came from the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and India.

Boustead ran one of Libya's largest sewage treatment plants in Tripoli and was contracted to build the \$300 million Al Marj township project.

Al Marj, or "the meadows" in Arabic, is 100km east of Benghazi, a port city 1,000km from the Libyan capital, Tripoli.

"When we were awarded the Al Marj project in 2007, Libya was very peaceful even though there was widespread poverty in the country," said Mr Foo.

He said signs of the impending unrest came with a call on social networking site Facebook for a "day of rage" in Benghazi on Feb 17 to end the 41-year rule of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

"Although we heard about the protest in Benghazi on Feb 17, we still didn't expect the city would be overrun so fast," said Mr Foo.

He added that the violence in Al Marj escalated after protesters set fire to buildings, including government offices and the police stations, the next day.

"The police station near our villa was on fire that night ... we saw police officers changing into civilian clothing and running away," he said.

His worst fears were realised in the early hours of Feb 19 when looters broke into the Boustead staff quarters next to the Al Marj township worksite.

Half of the spartan double-storey villa had been converted into a workshop while bedrooms on the second floor were partitioned into two separate spaces to accommodate Boustead's workers.

"It was 3.30am, I was awake because I thought I heard gunshots earlier, but realised it was the protesters burning the Turkish worksite nearby," said Mr Foo.

"Then I saw men entering our compound. Fearing for our lives, we locked up and hid in

our own rooms.”

But Mr Foo was quickly set upon by looters when they broke into his room.

“They kicked on my door – it was made of some flimsy wood and just one kick and they were in. There were about seven or eight of them,” he recounted.

Beaten and robbed

MR FOO was beaten with sticks and made to sit outside his room while the men helped themselves to his valuables.

“I was terrified, especially when they started grabbing and pushing me around, I thought they were going to kill me.”

He did not recognise any of the looters but suspected they may have been led to the quarters by one of their local workers.

“I suspect it was an inside job because our villa was secured but somehow they had the key to the place and knew I was the finance manager,” he said.

“They spent about an hour ransacking the place and made off with a few thousand (Libyan) dinars, our laptops, TV sets; they even drove away our vehicles but we were lucky to be alive.”

Mr Foo and the rest of his colleagues were lucky to escape with just minor bruises to their arms and hands.

“It’s a good thing they didn’t have any firearms because if they did, we’d probably be killed,” he said.

After the looters left, Mr Foo climbed onto the roof of the neighbouring villa to phone colleagues in Benghazi and Tripoli for help.

That was a smart move because the same looters had returned and they stole the staff’s remaining mobile phones.

“They must have come back when they saw us through the windows making phone calls after they left,” said Mr Foo.

“But I was already hiding away in the roof – even my staff could not find me.

“Then it started raining and I was drenched for over an hour while I was hiding up there waiting for help to come.”

His colleagues in Benghazi finally arrived at Al Marj with three panel vans to spirit the staff to

safety.

But that also served to ratchet up the terror as the convoy made slow progress through mass fighting on the streets to Benghazi’s Benina International Airport and a flight out.

“We left with only the shirts on our backs but we were lucky because by the time we arrived, we saw that African mercenaries loyal to Gaddafi were already there securing the airport,” said Mr Foo.

“In fact, later that day we learned that many protesters started carrying firearms; I think if we were caught in the middle of that, we would all be dead.”

Mr Foo and the rest of the Boustead team from Benghazi somehow managed to scramble on the last flight out to Tripoli – an hour’s flying time away – before the airport shut down.

“We almost didn’t make it on the flight and had to pay off a Libyan airport staff US\$500 (S\$635) before he would give us our boarding passes,” said Mr Foo.

The capital was still an oasis of relative peace amid the growing revolutionary mayhem in the desert country.

By coincidence, Boustead Infrastructures’ chief executive Michael Teo had flown into Tripoli on Feb 8 for one of his monthly visits.

Mr Teo, 44, and a father of three young children, was stuck like his staff and turned his hand to trying to bring some order to the escalating chaos.

“We were preparing to evacuate and were planning to spend a few more days securing our machinery and lock down our equipment,” he said.

“Plus our initial plan was to take the cue from the various embassies in Libya, but after Chuan Jin was robbed, we decided it was time to pull everyone out.”

Two days later, nine staff left Libya on an Emirates Airline flight while the remaining 22 stayed put because they did not have the appropriate travel documents, said Mr Keith Chu, vice-president of corporate marketing and investor relations at Boustead.

“Libya requires all foreigners to possess an exit visa before they can leave and at the time, the Libyan government was still in control of the airport, so they were stuck,” said Singapore-based Mr Chu.

Another blow for the staff, by now worn out and anxious after days of hiding out in their Tripoli villa, came on Feb 22 when Tripoli's airport was shut down due to the unrest and Emirates Airline cancelled all flights out.

But that did not stop the increasingly frantic efforts to find a way out of the bedlam. The phone lines were running hot between Boustead, the Singapore and Malaysia foreign affairs ministries, commercial airlines and International SOS – a Singapore firm which provides emergency assistance to travellers around the world.

At the top of Mr Foo's mind were his elderly parents and sister back home in Serangoon.

"I know my family in Singapore were really worried especially after they heard about the news that Gaddafi was planning to bomb Tripoli," said Mr Foo. "But all of us just wanted to leave Libya."

Last flight out

THE breakthrough came on Feb 23 when help from International SOS allowed Boustead to get the remaining 22 staff on an Air Malta flight.

"We practically caught the last flight out ... I must say that we were very lucky to make it out alive," said Mr Foo.

Still, it took around 48 hours and many transits and stopovers before they were back on home soil last Friday.

Mr Chu, who was helping to coordinate the evacuation from Singapore, said Boustead was in constant contact with the staff in Libya, their families and the Singapore and Malaysia foreign affairs ministries throughout the crisis.

"But once we heard that our people were in the air and out of Libya, we all cheered," he said.

While the shell-shocked staff take time off to get over their ordeal, the firm is starting to count its losses.

Mr Chu confirmed that the maximum financial exposure to its ventures in Libya would amount to about \$39.6 million.

Boustead chairman and group CEO Wong Fong Fui remains philosophical about the incident.

"You cannot be discouraged by such incidents," said the veteran entrepreneur. "The world is globalised and you have to learn how to survive in environments like that one we have just experienced, you just have to make sure that you can mitigate the risks, and go into new markets with your eyes open."

Mr Foo, understandably, has a different view. The graduate from the National University of Singapore had joked during his interview with The Straits Times that he had originally planned to find a Libyan wife during his posting in Al Marj.

So would he go back anytime soon? "No way," he said.

Boustead's interests

AL MARJ or "the meadows" in Arabic, is a city in north-east Libya and formerly the site of Barce, an ancient Greek colony.

Arabs took over the colony in AD642 but the present township grew around a Turkish fort built in 1842.

The modern town centre, however, was developed by the Italians between 1913 and 1941, and it served as an administrative centre and hill resort.

In 2007, Boustead Singapore and a joint-venture partner were awarded a \$300 million contract to build the 1,164-villa Al Marj township on a 465ha site.

Initially, the firm held a 65 per cent share of the contract, but the deal was restructured and Boustead's holding was cut to 35 per cent last year, after delays and other complications surrounding the project in recent years.

The Singapore-based firm has been designing and building water and wastewater treatment plants in Libya since 2002 through a subsidiary.

It also won a deal in 2004 to work on the country's largest sewage treatment plant, which is based in Libya's capital city, Tripoli.

As a result of the political unrest, Boustead has since suspended all operations in Libya. It said its financial exposure in the North African nation would be about \$39.6 million.