

My pride in evacuation of Coronavirus Britons from Wuhan – Matt Crow

I normally manage a team at the British Embassy in Beijing, analysing China's foreign policy. The team in Wuhan had been reporting on the early stages of coronavirus since December.

When it became clear we would need to run a second flight, I volunteered to help; we needed Chinese speakers so we could communicate with the authorities and drivers to get us there.

The drive to Wuhan (all the way down to the banks of the Yangtze) took about 15 hours and the roads were pretty much empty, which is unheard of in that part of China.

I've been working in Beijing for 5 years, and the snowfall as we set off was the heaviest I've seen during that time.

We stopped at a couple of service stations on the way. There were very few customers, but they were still staffed. The people working there were baffled to see a group of Brits driving towards Wuhan.

We had our temperatures taken at checkpoints along the road. Fortunately we were never above the limit. The Chinese officials reiterated that if we went into Wuhan, we wouldn't be able to drive out again because of the travel restrictions, so we certainly didn't want to miss the flight!

It was night by the time we reached Wuhan. Neon lights along the banks of the Yangtze lit up the river with slogans like 'salute the heroes fighting the epidemic'.

On the day of the evacuation, we woke early, ate ration packs and drove through the deserted city. At the airport, we hung Union flags so Brits, their families and other Europeans joining the UK flight would know who we were.

I really respect the stoicism and patience of those who joined us on the flight. People had travelled from all over Hubei province and had a long wait ahead. There was a real 'keep calm and carry on' mentality.

There were a couple of mini-dramas like people losing and then finding their passports again. Once people made it to the airport the process was generally smooth.

Our colleagues in Beijing and London had been working long hours for many days to make the flight happen, building up good relationships with the local authorities and sorting out much needed medical supplies with help from our colleagues across the world. This really made our job on the day easier, both getting Brits and their families to the airport, and supporting them when they arrived.

The flight had a strict deadline for leaving to avoid the pilots going over their flying time. Just before we were due to leave, one person, going through health screening, still hadn't made it to the departure gate. The team in Beijing kept in contact with him throughout, and when he eventually got through we ran together to the gate.

The flight itself felt short. Once the adrenaline had worn off, I fell asleep listening to Bob Dylan ('Shelter from the Storm' felt appropriate until landing in Storm Ciara). We had been up for nearly 24 hours at that point; I'm sure some of the Brits had been up for much longer. There were lots of young people and parents with babies. People seemed in good spirits.

It felt like home when the plane finally broke through the rain clouds and I saw the rolling green countryside. The landing was hard, but I didn't really notice.

Departing the plane in blustery conditions, we walked across the Tarmac to the waiting buses. We were given goodie bags – mine contained an RAF-branded ham sandwich and salt and vinegar crisps.

We had 3 days in solitary confinement before being able to mingle more freely. We keep busy: watch films, read, exercise, play guitar, organise quizzes. The NHS staff have been great and are always asking how they can help.

I hadn't told my family I was going to Wuhan because I didn't want to worry them. I called them once I got into quarantine; they seemed to take it ok. I look forward to seeing them soon.

Once I'm out of quarantine I want to get back to Beijing as soon as possible. Embassy staff are still out there working really hard, just like our colleagues in London, Tokyo and beyond, to deal with one of the most complicated crises we have faced in recent years.

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