A Falklands veteran who was working on a clean water project in Libya, a Cardiff contracts manager and a couple of Yorkshire teachers has thanked the Royal Navy for their safe rescue.

Mike Wilson, 61, was among the 207 exhausted civilians delivered to Malta on Saturday by HMS Cumberland.

The former sailor from Stamshaw in Portsmouth, Hampshire made his way from Brega in the desert south of Libya to meet the British warship in Benzaghi.
He said: "I can't speak highly enough of how we were treated and cared for in getting out of Libya.

"It was a very dangerous situation which was escalating and all of us onboard were glad to be rescued."

Mr Wilson was working on the Great Man Made River project in the town of Brega. Dozens of British workers have been involved in building a pipeline from a giant underground water source to the rest of Libya.

He said: "It's a really important programme for the people and it's a real shame that we have had to come out. But we were getting reports about looting and militias and it was best to get out of there."

Mr Wilson travelled north by car past fighting factions in Libya, and spent more than 30 hours in HMS Cumberland as she crossed rough seas to Malta.

He said: "I served in HMS Broadsword which was a frigate that was in the 1982 Falklands conflict. The seas in the South Atlantic are renowned for being choppy and dramatic but this was just the same as back then.

"We were in a small Junior Rates mess room and there were several people who were ill. But it was fine given the situation we were leaving and we're very happy to be safe.

"We were in a compound of buildings back in the desert and we had looters trying to get in, armed with knives.

"It was potentially terrifying situation and it's sad for Libya, where I've been for three years."

Mr Wilson's son David is in the Royal Navy and serves on HMS Illustrious and his other son Mark is an army corporal based in Germany.

Richard Weeks, a 64-year-old contracts manager from Sully near Cardiff, who had also been working on a clean water project, had been robbed at knifepoint..

The father of two said: "We were faced with looters rushing into the property where we were

holed up and there was nothing we could do. It had been getting more risky for the ten days before and there was no
prospect of it easing.

"They were armed with knives and knew they could take what they wanted, so it was better to let them get on with it. It was a very sad and terrifying situation. I've lived between Cardiff and Benghazi for 20 years and the hope is that the country can return to peace soon."

The government sent HMS Cumberland to Benghazi to collect Britons and civilians from more than 20 nations. RAF planes and commercial airliners have rescued people from the north african country.

Mr Weeks said: "The Royal Navy has really impressed me during this journey. Space and resources were obviously limited but people were kind and considerate and we were kept warm and fed."

Cumberland's Commanding Officer, Captain Steve Dainton, said: "Ten days ago the ship was off the coast of Somali which shows how flexible we can be."

Keith and Sue Rodgers are bound for Settle in North Yorkshire but said they were reluctant to leave Libya.

Mrs Rodgers, 54, who teaches primary pupils at the British School in Benghazi, said: "It was very surreal because we could hear gun fire but could still pop to the shops to get items.

"It was in the last few days that the situation really worsened and we knew we had to go. We live in a normal apartment block in the city and had never had any trouble before; the Libyan people are incredibly friendly.

"We don't know if we will go back yet, for the moment we will go back home to Yorkshire."

HMS Cumberland is continuing to offer assistance in getting people out of Libya, and the Type 42 destroyer HMS York is also nearby to help if required.

Editor's note : Both ships are destined for the scrap heap under recently announced defence cuts. But this proves that 19's not enough.