

# British marine admitted that captured patrol was spying on Iran

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Captain Chris Air, the man in charge of the 15 marines and sailors captured by Iranian revolutionary guards and released on April 4, told *Sky News* that they were on an intelligence-gathering mission.

The admission, made five days before he was seized in the Shatt al Arab waterway, was suppressed until after the Royal Navy personnel were released, according to Sky, “so it would not jeopardise their safety.”

Of course, the embargo placed on the story also served to deceive the public and sustain the propaganda campaign portraying Iran as having carried out unprovoked aggression against a blameless British force.

The joint *Five News* and *Sky News* interview was recorded on March 13 aboard HMS Cornwall.

Air informed *Sky* that his team was on an “Interaction Patrol,” during which they board various fishing dhows—ostensibly to search for contraband but also to gain intelligence on Iranian activity.

“This is what’s called an IPAT,” he told *Sky*’s Jonathan Samuels: “An Interaction Patrol whereby we come alongside or even board the fishing dhows and basically interact with the crew.

“Basically, we speak to the crew, find out if they have any problems, let them know we’re here to protect them, protect their fishing and stop any terrorism and piracy in the area.

“Secondly, it’s to gather int [intelligence]. If they do have any information, because they’re here for days at a time, they can share it with us. Whether it’s about piracy or any sort of Iranian activity in the area. Obviously, we’re right by the buffer zone with Iran.”

“It’s good to gather int on the Iranians,” he added.

When he was asked whether there were “any dangers,” Air replied, “At the moment, we haven’t

encountered anyone who’s been anything other than compliant....

“We are capable of doing non-compliant boardings as well,” he added, “however, I think they’d be a bit stupid to start being aggressive with us because obviously we’ve got seven armed Marines....”

The gathering of intelligence is an integral part of the combined operations of the US and Royal Navies involving two aircraft carrier battle groups patrolling the waters off Iran. The naval presence has been built up against a political background of United Nations sanctions imposed on Tehran over its uranium-enrichment programme and allegations that it is arming and funding the insurgency in Iraq.

Preparations for a possible military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities—either by the US or Israel—have been extensively leaked to the press by sources in America’s security services.

Under such circumstances, the dispute over whether or not the British vessels were in Iranian or Iraqi waters when their boats were boarded is somewhat academic, given the admission that they were there to spy on Iran. At the very least, it further undermines the credibility of Britain’s denials of hostile intent.

The official response of the Blair government to the belated broadcast of *Sky*’s self-censored report was to portray Air’s remarks as uncontroversial.

Defence Secretary Des Browne told *Sky News* that “Modern military operations all have an element of gathering intelligence.” He further insisted that “The UN mandate would clearly empower the military taskforce to gather information about the environment in which they were working.”

But the government’s attempts to claim that the admission of spying has no significance are belied by the categorical denial issued by First Sea Lord Admiral

Sir Jonathon Band.

In the midst of an extended defence of the 15 from complaints by ex-military top brass and the right-wing media that the sailors should not have made admissions of having strayed into Iranian waters and even should have “fought back” to evade capture, Band denied that they had been involved in intelligence-gathering operations against Iran. “We are certainly not spying on them,” he said. “The Iranians in that part of Iraqi territorial waters are not part of the scene.”

“They weren’t on combat operations,” he added.

The report was all but ignored by the British media after it was made public. The *Daily Mirror* ran an article, but with no editorial comment.

In the aftermath of the sailors’ release, the government and the armed forces have sought to reinvigorate their efforts to turn Iran into a pariah state and to justify their military aggression in the Gulf.

As the freed sailors arrived back in Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair utilised the death of four British soldiers, including two women, killed in Basra by a roadside bomb, to reiterate his claim that Iran is arming insurgents.

“Now it is far too early to say the particular terrorist act that killed our forces was an act committed by terrorists who were backed by any elements of the Iranian regime, so I make no allegation in respect of that particular incident,” he stated.

“But the general picture, as I said before, is that there are elements, at least, of the Iranian regime that are backing, financing, arming, supporting terrorism in Iraq and I repeat that our forces are there specifically at the request of the Iraqi government and with the full authority of the United Nations.”

On Friday, a press conference was organised by the Ministry of Defence at the Royal Marines Base at Chivenor, north Devon, attended by six of the sailors. A prepared statement was read out by Captain Air and Lieutenant Carman accusing the Iranians of extracting confessions by psychological torture such as being kept blindfolded, held in isolation and threatened with seven years in prison.

When questioned by the media, Carman said that one detainee had been hit but not very hard.

There is no way of verifying the accounts now being provided by the sailors. But one can safely predict that this will not stop the British and US media from

launching into outraged—and utterly hypocritical, given the torture inflicted upon detainees held by the US and Britain in Iraq—comment over the coming days.

Air was asked a question by only one *Independent Television News* reporter regarding his earlier admission to *Sky News* that his unit was engaged in spying, and responded that his statement had been misinterpreted.



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