

# Freed British sailors allege torture by Iran: Why do the media ask no questions?

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The British media have accepted without qualification or question the claims of Iranian mistreatment made by the recently released sailors and marines at a press conference organised by the armed forces last Friday.

There was clearly no evidence of physical ill treatment during repeated appearances before television cameras during their detention. But in a joint statement the 15 said they had been “psychologically tortured” after being captured by a regional Revolutionary Guard commander responsible for Iranian waters within the Shatt al Arab waterway on March 25.

Immediately after landing at London’s Heathrow airport, all the 15 marines and sailors, who were clearly fit and well, were taken to the Royal Marine base at Chivenor, near Barnstaple in Devon, to be debriefed by MI6. At the press conference held the next day, the two most senior officers, Lieutenant Felix Carmen and Captain Chris Air, accompanied by just five of the sailors and marines, read stiffly from prepared statements.

Carmen said that after their boat was seized by the Iranian guards when they were well within Iraqi waters they were taken to a naval base up the Shatt al Arab waterway where they were blindfolded, stripped and subjected to “random interrogations.” The questions were “aggressive and the handling rough,” he claimed.

The next day, they were flown to a Tehran prison. Here the 14 men were allegedly again blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs and lined up against a wall. They heard the sounds of weapons being cocked. One man vomited and another screamed, “They are going to shoot us. Do something.”

Carmen supposedly managed to free his hands and pulled his blindfold down. But there was no firing squad. He was then grabbed, but that was, he admitted, the only roughing up he got—something that cannot be said of US and British-held detainees at Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and the military prisons in and around Basra.

Carmen said that the sailors were stripped and given pyjamas to wear. For the first few nights they were kept in separate but adjoining stone cells, 8 feet by 6 feet, with nothing but piles of blankets to sleep on. They had been able to “whisper” to each other through the grilles as they were marched to the toilet, although how they were able to do this was unclear as they were, by their own admission, supposedly blindfolded all the

time.

They were interrogated most nights and were given two options: admit that they had entered Iranian waters and go home, or be jailed for seven years. They agreed (although again it was unclear how they could have agreed since they were supposedly held in solitary confinement) that they would cooperate to some extent with the Iranians.

Seaman Faye Turney—the only female captive—had apparently been kept separate from the others for 10 days. The seamen said they had known nothing about her whereabouts until then, while she had been given to believe that all the others had been released.

After 10 days, the 15 sailors were allowed opportunities to meet, given food and games of chess and some were shown relaxed, cheerful and well on Iranian television.

On day 12, they were taken, blindfolded, to a government building and given three-piece suits. It was only when they watched President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s speech on television that they realised that they were to be released. Lt. Carmen said, “There was a moment of huge elation. We were made to line up to meet the president. My advice to everyone was not to mess this up now—we all wanted to get home.”

The Iranian Foreign Ministry has rejected claims that their lives had ever been under threat, saying that the news conference had been staged by the British military authorities to cover up their entry into Iranian waters. But it is not necessary to dismiss what they said as lies, nor to believe that the Iranian government is not capable of such actions, to ask why a basic commitment to professional journalistic integrity did not provoke any questions as to the truth or otherwise of the now official version of events.

After all, the press conference was called in the aftermath of what has universally been seen as a humiliation for the British government and the Royal Navy. The press conference was the navy’s official attempt to present its version of events, to insist that Iran had seized its sailors in Iraqi waters and had extracted statements to the contrary by coercion. It was also meant to defuse the furious criticisms in the right-wing press about the navy’s unpreparedness and denunciations of the sailors for allowing themselves to be captured and cooperating with the Iranian authorities too easily, including their admissions of

trespass and chatting and laughing on television.

With so much riding on the veracity of the report of such controversial events, any journalist worthy of the name would have been forced to ask probing questions of the captives. Especially given that they included eight members of the navy's elite commando unit, who were supposedly all prepared to lie about where they were captured after just over a week in detention and faced with little more than threats and isolation.

One must recall that statements to the contrary including a televised press conference featuring none other than Captain Air and Lieutenant Carmen.

The two most senior officers captured had admitted that they "had trespassed without permission" before adding, "So far we have been treated very well by all the people here. They have looked after us and made sure we are given enough food and treated very well by them, so I thank them for that."

The two men looked in good condition, wearing military fatigues on April 1. And, by way of explanation for his televised appearance, Air had said then that the authorities had shown him Global Positioning Satellite data proving that they had been seized inside Iranian waters.

Air is in any case not best placed to make unchallenged statements as to what actually happened during the past weeks. On March 13, he had admitted in a little reported television interview, two weeks before the incident, that his crew were gathering intelligence on the Iranians, under cover of an anti-smuggling operation that included boarding other ships in the waterways.

At the conference it was the two officers who did most of the talking. The other servicemen only spoke when asked direct questions, and then only briefly.

Marine Joe Tindall said that the guards "played various mind games": "We had a blindfold and plastic cuffs, hands behind our backs, heads against the wall. Basically there were weapons cocking." He added that he was glad that at least they were fed and watered three times a day and given cigarettes.

Royal Navy Operator Maintainer Arthur Batchelor said, "We were told not to talk at all times." He added, "It felt like emotional torture—we were left on our own and blindfolded. We didn't know anything and didn't know if our families knew anything. At some point, I did have fears we would not survive because my imagination was running."

The other three did not comment on their treatment at the hands of the Iranians. In addition, 8 of the 15 were not present at the press conference, including Turney herself. Not one journalist remarked on their absence, or challenged any aspect of the proceedings.

To understand the reason for such an uncritical approach, it is instructive to examine not the most right-wing newspapers but rather the editorial response of the nominally liberal *Guardian*—a paper that has been critical of the Iraq war and opposes military action against Iran.

Defending the sailors from the earlier criticisms voiced by the

*Daily Mail*, it called their explanations of their behaviour "clear and intelligent" and the press conference "gripping." "They seem to have behaved both honourably and rationally. Their captors did neither," the leader opined.

It then made the revealing comment, "Their evidence may build public outrage about the incident, which has been strangely lacking until now."

The attempt to cultivate such outrage is clearly considered to be necessary by the *Guardian*, given its appraisal that "initial resentment at the perfectly proper way in which the group behaved was perhaps really part of a wider public resentment at Britain's whole involvement in Iraq, and what has gone wrong there. Yesterday even the giant union jack pinned up behind the group could not hide the fact that Iraq has been a British defeat and that this episode has been part of it."

In this instance, moreover, it is not just the Blair government but the military that had been humiliated and discredited. And this is something that fundamentally threatens the long-term interests of British imperialism.

The *Guardian* therefore insists, "If Britain has lost, it is because of politicians and the battles they have chosen to fight, not the performance of the armed services."

This should not be taken as a disagreement with military interventions. The *Guardian* goes on to argue that military interventions are vital now and in future, insisting that "the military will remain a far larger part of British life than many would have guessed when the Berlin wall fell."

But their success is threatened by Blair's failure in Iraq and the erosion of public support and confidence in the military this has engendered.

Noting that the support for parents for their children joining the army has declined, the *Guardian* finds solace in the fact that recruitment is nevertheless rising. It then poses the question, "What, in the future, will these forces do? The challenge is one for policy makers, more than soldiers. The captured men and women in the Gulf, like soldiers in Basra, have borne the brunt of an interventionist foreign policy, which has failed. But isolation would be dangerous, even if it were possible. Between a narrow doctrine of national interest, and Mr. Blair's haphazard lunging at demons, can a middle way be found for military philosophy: an enlightened balance between internationalism and an awareness of Britain's limits?"

The role of the more liberal press, whatever its tactical differences with the government, is to maintain and support an interventionist foreign policy. For this, it is absolutely crucial that public support for and confidence in the armed forces—the *sine qua non* of an imperialist foreign policy—is maintained.



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