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Iran: How to start a war

By Gwynne Dyer

I don't want to second-guess the British after the fact," said U.S. Navy Lt. Commander Erik Horner, "but our rules of engagement allow a little more latitude. Our boarding team's training is a little bit more towards self-preservation."

Does that mean that one of his U.S. boarding teams would have opened fire if it had been them in the two inflatable boats that were surrounded by Iranian Revolutionary Guard fast patrol boats off the coast of Iraq on March 23? "Agreed. Yes."

Just as well that it was a British boarding team, then. The 15 British sailors and marines who were captured and taken to Tehran for "questioning" last week are undoubtedly having an unpleasant time, but they are alive, and Britain is only involved in two wars — Iraq and Afghanistan. If it had been one of Horner's boarding teams, they would all be dead, and the United States and Iran would now be at war.

Horner is the executive officer of the USS Underwood, the U.S. frigate that works together with HMS Cornwall, the British ship that the captive boarding party came from. Interviewed after the incident by Terri Judd of *The Independent*, the only British print journalist on HMS Cornwall, he was obviously struggling to be polite about the gutless Brits, but he wasn't having much success.

"The U.S. Navy rules of engagement say we have not only a right to self defense but also an obligation to self defense," Horner explained. The British "had every right in my mind and every justification to defend themselves rather than allow themselves to be taken. Our reaction was, 'Why didn't your guys defend themselves?'"

So there they are, eight sailors and seven marines in two rubber boats, with personal weapons and no protection whatever, sitting about a foot above the water, surrounded by six or seven Iranian attack boats with mounted machine guns. "Defend yourself" by opening fire, and after a single long burst from half a dozen heavy machine-guns there will be 14 dead young men and one dead young woman in two rapidly sinking inflatables, and your country will be at war. Seems a bit pointless, really.

It's a cultural thing, at bottom. Britain has a long history of fight-



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ing wars and taking casualties, but the combat doctrines are less

quite different from the regular armed forces) enjoy considerable autonomy within this system.

According to U.S. authorities in Iraq, the five Iranian diplomats arrested by U.S. troops in a raid in Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan last January were actually Revolutionary Guards, and it would seem that their colleagues want them back. Kidnapping U.S. troops as hostages for an exchange could cause a war, so they decided to grab some Brits instead. And it will probably work, after a certain delay.

In this episode, the United States' reputation for belligerence

According to the U.S. authorities in Iraq, the five Iranian diplomats arrested by U.S. troops in a raid in Irbil in Iraqi Kurdistan last January were actually Revolutionary Guards, and it would seem that their colleagues want them back. Kidnapping U.S. troops as hostages for an exchange could cause a war, so they decided to grab some Brits instead. And it will probably work.

haired. British rules of engagement "are very much de-escalatory, because we don't want wars starting," explained Admiral Sir Alan West, former First Sea Lord. "Rather than roaring into action and sinking everything in sight we try to step back, and that, of course, is why our chaps were ... able to be captured and taken away."

That emollient British approach is probably why the Iranian Revolutionary Guard chose to grab British troops rather than U.S. troops. It was obviously a snatch operation: The Iranians would not normally have half a dozen attack boats ready to go even if some "coalition" boat checking Iraq-bound ships for contraband did stray across the invisible dividing line into Iranian waters (which the British insist they didn't).

But it was not necessarily an operation ordered from the top of Iran's government. In fact, there is no single source of authority in Iran's curious system of "multiple governments," as one observer labelled the impenetrably complex division of responsibilities and powers between elected civilians and unelected mullahs. The Revolutionary Guards (who are

served U.S. troops well, diverting Iranian attention to the British instead. In the larger scheme of things, it is a bit more problematic.

A quite similar snatch operation against the equally belligerent Israelis last July led to a month-long Israeli aerial bombardment of Lebanon and a retaliatory hail of Hezbollah rockets on northern Israeli cities. Well over a thousand people were dead by the end, although nothing was settled.

Any day now, a minor clash along Iraq's land or sea frontier with Iran could kill some U.S. troops and give Pres. George W. Bush an excuse to attack Iran, if he wants one — and he certainly seems to. If the Revolutionary Guards had got it wrong and attacked a U.S. boarding party by mistake, he would have his excuse now, and bombs might already be falling on Iran. All the pieces are in place, and the war could start at any time. ☹

Gwynne Dyer is a London-based independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.