

# Britain contrives ‘Chinese military recruitment’ allegations

## Daniel Duggan a scapegoat of Five Eyes anti-China agenda (Part 1)

*Australians should be suspicious that the October 2022 arrest and imprisonment of Australian citizen and former US Marine “Top Gun” pilot Daniel Duggan, is part of a coordinated Five Eyes operation designed to justify the introduction of new national security laws which infringe upon the civil liberties of both citizens and former servicemen, in service of an operation to escalate anti-China tensions which is leading Australia to war. Part One of this series examines the coordinated British media-government-intelligence operation which manufactured a narrative that the Chinese government was “headhunting” former Western military pilots. Part Two will document that the arrest and persecution of Daniel Duggan was a key part of this operation, and examine how Australian intelligence agencies have influenced the legislative process.*



Daniel Duggan, with wife Saffrine and two of their children on a visit to China, is a scapegoat for a sinister Five Eyes operation to demonise all contact with China. Photo: Twitter

The earliest allegations that a South African flight school had functioned as an intermediary for the Chinese government to headhunt Western military pilots surfaced five months before the coordinated media campaign launched in Britain, in October 2022. The claims were first reported by a web-based French publication, Intelligence Online, in a 23 May 2022 article titled “China hones its air combat skills with help from renegade Western pilots”. *Intelligence Online* (IO) began receiving significant subsidies from the French government in 2021, coinciding with the publication’s dramatic increase in China-related reporting, which became markedly more politicised and aligned with familiar anti-China narratives promoted in Western mainstream media.

In this article, IO cited anonymous sources to report that in addition to at least three French fighter pilots who had reportedly “taken part in flight training sessions for the Chinese army”, Australian and American pilots had also been approached. According to IO, “Such operations enable China’s PLA [People’s Liberation Army], which is looking to obtain skills and information from the Western armed forces, to learn the operating methods and rules of engagement in the French air force. It enables it, too, to observe the reflexes and combat practices of the pilots, all of which could be useful information in a conflict situation.” IO claimed that some of these “secret training sessions” were provided by the Test Flying Academy of South Africa (TFASA). IO claimed that TFASA “recruits former Western air force pilots by offering them attractive salaries and then sends them to China”, stating that TFASA’s activities had “put Western intelligence services on alert”.

Implying guilt by association, IO described TFASA’s business connections with Chinese universities and state-owned companies, with which TFASA collaborates to train Chinese commercial and civilian pilots. IO also reported that TFASA provided training for Chinese pilots to fly Chinese-made attack helicopters and troop transporters.

### British kick off media witch-hunt

After *Intelligence Online*’s article was published in May 2022, there was virtually no further reporting on the matter until 18 October 2022, when allegations that the South African flight school had served as a go-between for the Chinese military to headhunt British and Western pilots exploded in the UK’s mainstream press. These reports, which rapidly headlined in American and Australian media, were

launched mere hours before the Australian Attorney-General accepted the US government's provisional warrant for the arrest of Australian citizen and former US Marine "Top Gun" pilot Daniel Duggan, who was briefly employed by TFASA over a decade prior. Although Duggan adamantly insists that the training he provided to Chinese pilots while employed by TFASA was of a commercial, not military, nature, his arrest at the request of US intelligence agencies appears to have been timed to corroborate the media narrative.

On 18 October 2022, Britain's BBC spearheaded the reporting, claiming that up to 30 former British military pilots were "*thought* to have gone to train members of China's People's Liberation Army", and had been "lured to China with large sums of money to pass on their expertise to the Chinese military". (Emphasis added). It was reported that current serving personnel had also been targeted for recruitment, but none were thought to have accepted. These claims were based on a briefing to journalists by an anonymous "Western official", who alleged that pilots "were being recruited through intermediary headhunters", citing "a particular flying academy based in South Africa as being involved". Later, the UK's *Daily Mail* revealed that TFASA was named in an intelligence briefing to journalists as the flight school which had allegedly acted as an intermediary for Chinese government headhunters.

The BBC reported that the anonymous "Western official" asserted that pilots of other "allied nations" were also targeted by the recruitment scheme. International mainstream media claimed that ex-servicemen of Five Eyes nations—the international spying alliance of the USA, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—were specifically targeted. The testimony of several former military pilots (all anonymous) was reported in support of the claims.

## Intimidation campaign

The BBC reported the claims of the anonymous "Western official" alongside warnings against Chinese "headhunting" issued by the office of UK Prime Minister Liz Truss and the British Ministry of Defence (MoD), in statements to the press which were evidently released around the same time that the anonymous "Western official" briefed journalists. The MoD issued an "intelligence alert" which was intended to "warn former military pilots against working for the Chinese military", according to the BBC. The MoD stated that it was "taking decisive steps to stop Chinese recruitment schemes attempting to headhunt serving and former UK armed forces pilots to train People's Liberation Army personnel in the People's Republic of China". This included identifying serving personnel who "may" have been tempted by such an offer and warning them against it; subjecting pilots to a vetting review on return to Defence or reserve duties, which would result in their security clearance being denied; and giving serving personnel "unequivocal advice about the unacceptability of such activity", according to Minister of State for the Armed Forces James Heapey. Although the MoD referred to alleged "Chinese recruitment schemes", Heapey clarified in a 15 November 2022 Parliamentary statement that the recruitment of British ex-service pilots "has not been conducted directly by Chinese military personnel or by its civil servants", but instead reportedly through a "third-party training school".

**BBC**

### Ex-UK pilots lured to help Chinese military, MoD says

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One of the headlines in the British media storm that coincided with the arrest of Daniel Duggan; his arrest appears timed to corroborate the contrived allegations in the UK media.

Despite the uproar, it was confirmed that there was no evidence that any of the pilots had breached the *Official Secrets Act*, and on 18 October the MoD confirmed to the BBC that the training and recruitment did not breach any UK laws. Despite this, it appears that extreme pressure was applied to any pilots concerned. The MoD announced that Defence Intelligence was "engaging with the individuals already involved to ensure they are fully aware of the risk of prosecution under the *Official Secrets Act*". In a blizzard of media coverage that same day, Armed Forces Minister James Heapey told Sky News UK that the government had approached the people involved and made it clear that "it was our expectation that they would not continue to be part of that organisation. We are going to put into law that once people have been given that warning it would become an offence to then go and continue the training".

Although the pilots had not broken any laws, their loyalty was impugned by UK government officials

and the mainstream media. On BBC Radio 4, Heapey stated: “It certainly doesn’t match my understanding of service of our nation—even in retirement—to then go and work with a foreign power, especially one that challenges the UK interest so keenly”. Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood, a noted China hawk who is also a lieutenant colonel in Britain’s 77th Brigade, a psychological warfare unit, tweeted that the veterans should be stripped of their British citizenship. Mainstream media such as the UK’s Daily Mail followed suit, announcing that the pilots had been denounced as “traitors” by other servicemen. In Sky News UK’s Heapey interview, the reporter summed up the intention of the scare campaign: “So, don’t be a traitor. Come home before you can’t and we put you in jail”. Heapey did not contradict this extraordinary statement, instead only replying: “Well yeah, don’t go and train foreign air forces without checking with the MOD whether they are a foreign air force that we would want to see you train, would be a pretty good rule.”

It is evident that the scare campaign was considered to have been successful. In testimony to the UK House of Commons Defence Committee on 1 February 2023, British Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Wigston, stated that he had “taken heart” that when the matter was publicised, “a number of our people came forward to talk about when they had been approached, how the approach was made and who made the approach. There is a level of awareness now that this is an insidious third-party recruiting activity, where you might find yourself working for an organisation that is not all that it seems. We have people coming forward now. *The security climate has changed*; security awareness is much higher”. (Emphasis added). In a 1 March 2023 interview with ABC while on a visit to Australia, Wigston stated that “We made the decision to go public on this in a very loud, clear way, that it’s unacceptable and it’s something that we were prepared to call China out [on] publicly. ... Since then, we’ve had a number of people come to us, to the authorities, saying, ‘I’ve been approached, this has happened to me’—the level of awareness, and I think that’s reflected internationally now, that’s reassured me that we’ve got the message across. ... I’m confident that this approach [of going public] has nipped this [problem] in the bud”.

## **British government previously raised no objections to TFASA**

No official British government statements explicitly named TFASA as the organisation which had allegedly acted as an intermediary for Chinese government headhunters. Instead, official representatives only referred to “third parties” or a “third-party training school”; it was the media that pronounced TFASA as the culprit (after the company was named in an intelligence briefing to journalists).



The absence of any official confirmation that TFASA had facilitated Chinese government headhunting was likely because, according to a 22 October statement released by the flight school, the British MoD was fully aware of the company’s business activities and had been in contact with TFASA for many years. Since 2013, TFASA’s British instructors had “been in direct contact on an individual basis with the UK MoD and other UK Government agencies prior to undertaking training contracts with the Company’s clients, including its Chinese clients”. According to TFASA, “Neither the UK MoD nor any other UK Government agency has raised any objections to TFASA, or its employees with whom the agencies have been in direct contact, regarding the Company’s fulfilment of any training contracts.” TFASA’s statements contradicted Armed Forces Minister James Heapey’s claim in his 18 October Sky News UK interview that the issue had “been a concern with the MoD for a number of years”.

According to TFASA, the training it provides is also available from other civilian contractors, including organisations based in Europe, and in the Five Eyes nations of Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada. In addition, TFASA asserts that all of its training is unclassified and uses open-source materials. The flight school does not teach any classified tactics, restricted information, or frontline activities. According to TFASA, none of its instructors are “in possession of any legally or operationally sensitive information relating to the national security interests of any country, whether those from where its employees are drawn or in which it provides training”.

A few months before the scare campaign against alleged Chinese recruitment activities of ex-servicemen began, Sky News UK had reported on 6 August 2022 that leaked documents had revealed the UK’s dire shortage of fighter pilots. It was reported that decades of privatisation, outsourcing and budget cuts had gutted the British air force’s recruitment and training capabilities, and the situation had reached crisis point. Elite recruits were being forced to wait for years before receiving training. Sky News reported that the backlog was so severe that the British Royal Air Force (RAF) was considering asking some recruits to quit voluntarily. A leaked internal memo revealed that top RAF officers were concerned about the “damaging drain” of pilots quitting to join the private sector. One slide stated: “The draw is so great from such a small pool we are approaching a critical mass point”.

A similar situation exists in the USA, which is experiencing a recruiting crisis across the armed forces. On 31 March 2022, the Federal News Network reported that the US Air Force had been forced to bring back retired pilots to fill staffing gaps, and it may take over 20 years before the Air Force could solve its pilot shortage. Federal News Network reported that Maj.-Gen. Albert Miller, Director of Training and Readiness and Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations at Headquarters for the US Air Force, stated that

the Air Force was short about 1,650 pilots. The majority of the shortage was concentrated in fighter pilots (short 1,100 pilots). This followed a 2018 US Government Accountability Office report which found that the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps were each 25 per cent short of fighter pilots needed in critical areas. The US government has increased bonuses for military staff in an attempt to compete with the private sector, which offers attractive salary packages and benefits such as assistance with college fees.

## Politicised operation



The flight training school Daniel Duggan briefly worked for contradicted this claim by the Minister, insisting the MoD was kept informed of everything it did.

In response to questions from British parliamentarians concerning the training school revelations, Air Chief Marshal Wigston admitted in 1 February 2023 testimony to the UK House of Commons Defence Committee that the training had been “going on for many years and it goes back to a period when we took a different approach to China. We took a much more engaging approach: we did training, it was formal, we had state visits, and the Red Arrows went and displayed in China in [2018]. So I can understand why those people who went and became contractors, helping in simulators and with flying—training at that stage—would have felt that it was a reasonable thing to do.” Despite this, Wigston expressed his “disgust” at former servicemen who were reportedly currently involved in the training. The Air Chief Marshal expressed a desire for Parliament to provide for “beefed-up tools with which we can deal with people who choose to go and work for a potential adversary air force”. Although the recruitment was reported by the media as an alarming and pervasive issue, Wigston revealed that the highly-publicised number of 30 British pilots allegedly involved in the training was the total number *going back over a decade*. Wigston claimed that it “was not so much the volume that gave us cause for concern in the past year or so; it was just the scale of the recruiting activity that was going on”.

In a 19 October 2022 Twitter post, the UK MoD announced that “when former UK military pilots provide training to the People’s Liberation Army of China it clearly erodes the UK’s defence advantage”. However, it was revealed in the 1 February Defence Committee hearing that as recently as 2019, Chinese nationals had received officer training at the UK’s Royal Air Force College. Until around 2016 the MoD had sponsored a scheme under which British Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots trained Chinese pilots, which Air Chief Marshal Wigston described as “flying-related training but not flying training—for example, flight safety and supervisory training; the sort of things you would do as a normal part of defence engagement with any nation as a way to build relationships—but, as I say, *that was at a different time*.” (Emphasis added.) In November 2018, a delegation from Britain’s Royal Air Force Aerobatic Team, the “Red Arrows”, visited China to “strengthen UK-China links”, according to an official statement issued by the British Consulate in Guangzhou. During the visit, British and Chinese pilots “shared ideas on flight training and teamwork”.

The truth, as Air Chief Marshal Wigston admitted, is that it is the changing geopolitical climate of escalating hostility toward China which made the ex-servicemen’s training activities suddenly unacceptable, as opposed to the insinuation that the pilots were revealing Western military secrets or “eroding the UK’s defence advantage”. According to the flight school itself, British authorities had been aware of the organisation’s activities for years and had never raised any objections. Like similar anti-China operations previously conducted in Australia, the politicised witch hunt against former Western servicemen who were accused of disloyalty because they had (legally) trained Chinese pilots was apparently timed to coincide with the introduction of more foreign interference legislation, which impinges upon the civil liberties of British citizens.

The 18 October 2022 Sky News UK coverage reported that although the pilots had not broken any laws, this was “an embarrassing loophole that’s quickly being closed”. In a Twitter statement the following day, the MoD announced that it was reviewing the use of confidentiality agreements, with the aim of “providing additional contractual levers to prevent individuals breaching security”. The MoD’s 18 October statement to the BBC referred to the UK’s new National Security Bill, which would “create additional tools to tackle contemporary security challenges—including this one”. In its 19 October Twitter post, the MoD said the new legislation, which was introduced in May 2022 and is currently passing through British Parliament, would “capture a range of relevant activity and provide



additional possible routes to prosecution". On 18 October, the same day that the British media erupted over alleged Chinese recruitment of ex-servicemen, the UK government introduced an amendment to the National Security Bill which established a Foreign Influence Registration Scheme to "compel those acting for a foreign power or entity to declare political influencing activity", with criminal penalties for non-compliance. The Registration Scheme, which, according to a 15 November 2022 UK Parliamentary Research Briefing on the National Security Bill, was introduced "in light of ... representations from the director general of MI5", drew on "the experience of comparable schemes in the USA and Australia". This was in reference to Australia's Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme, a part of Australia's foreign interference legislation which was also requested by national security agencies and introduced in a similar climate of politicised anti-China hysteria.

## **Intelligence-instigated campaign**

Although media reports that "Five Eyes" pilots were being targeted for recruitment by the Chinese government were touted as the reason that the British, and later Australian, governments flagged new legislation to prevent the practice, these laws appear to have long been desired by Five Eyes intelligence agencies.

The earliest reports claiming that TFASA functioned as an intermediary for Chinese military headhunters, published by *Intelligence Online* in May 2022, reported: "Western pilots ready to work for TFASA are not well regarded by their countries' intelligence services. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which is already working hard to counter the threat posed by Chinese interference, is *working with the armed forces to deprive them of their security clearance and take legal action against them.*" (Emphasis added.) Later, ASIO Chief Mike Burgess confirmed that ASIO had been tracking former Australian Defence Force servicemen for several years, some of whom he claimed were "willing to sell their military training and expertise to foreign governments". In his 21 February 2023 Annual Threat Assessment speech, Burgess stated that "In some cases, we and our partners have been able to stop the former insiders travelling overseas to provide the training, but in others, *legal ambiguities have impeded law enforcement's ability to intervene.*" (Emphasis added.)

Similarly in the UK, the 22 October 2022 *Daily Mail* reported that it had learned (evidently from intelligence-connected sources) that in 2019 several ex-RAF pilots, who were then working in the civilian aerospace sector, had decided that the "wages offered by Beijing" justified a security downgrade when they returned to the UK. The *Daily Mail* reported: "Their departure, and the mechanisms behind their recruitment, attracted the attention of staff at Thames House, the London home of MI5". According to the *Daily Mail*, "Although there were no 'legal levers' to curtail their activities, officials communicated their displeasure. Those who took the jobs decided to carry on regardless. ... Without any legislation to freeze the pilots' assets, UK intelligence and defence chiefs remained in a quandary as to how to block the brain-drain to Beijing". Notably, TFASA's statement, which was issued on the same day that the *Daily Mail* article was published, directly contradicted these reports. According to the flight school, no UK government agency, "has raised any objections to TFASA, or its employees with whom the agencies have been in direct contact, regarding the Company's fulfilment of any training contracts." (Emphasis added.)

As noted, no official government statements named TFASA as the organisation which had allegedly functioned as an intermediary for Chinese military recruitment, instead referring to a "third party" which supposedly facilitated the headhunting. The media filled in the blanks by naming TFASA as the culprit, after the organisation was named in an intelligence briefing to journalists. The briefing appears to have been coordinated with statements issued by the MoD and its representatives.

In an extraordinary admission, the 22 October *Daily Mail* reported that the behind-the-scenes "naming and shaming" of TFASA to journalists was a deliberate tactic, which had been used by intelligence agencies in previous anti-China operations, which utilised the press as a vehicle to achieve intelligence objectives. The *Mail* reported it had learned that "intelligence services have [previously provided] a deterrent to headhunting by the People's Liberation Army. Earlier this year,

the security agency [MI5] sensationally outed a Chinese agent working in the House of Commons”, referring to the case of parliamentary researcher Christine Lee, who was accused of being a Chinese spy in a rare “threat alert” issued by MI5. The *Daily Mail* reported that this “operation”, which “saw journalists receiving detailed briefings from spooks, successfully highlighted threats to UK security and disrupted Chinese intelligence-gathering”. Notably, despite MI5’s highly publicised claims that Lee was a spy, there were no arrests made and mainstream reporting on the matter was careful to clarify that Lee was not alleged to have broken any laws. The *Mail* reported that the success of this media-intelligence operation, which effectively “named and shamed the culprits”, “led the

intelligence services to conclude so-called ‘outing activity’ could be effective in preventing the People’s Liberation Army gaining any more Western expertise”. The *Mail* reported that intelligence services had applied the same model in the operation which alleged Chinese headhunting of Western pilots, boasting that “This week’s [intelligence] briefings to newspapers about the role of TFASA gained huge media traction and have already led to an increase in reporting from within the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy about approaches made to pilots by recruitment agencies representing China”.

It is evident that in the wake of this coordinated media campaign, in which intelligence agencies played an active role, Five Eyes agencies will receive the “legal levers” they need to ostensibly “block the brain-drain to Beijing”. Both the British and Australian governments have flagged the introduction of new national security legislation to address the media-hyped issue. This legislation appears to extend far beyond the protection of state secrets. According to a 15 February 2023 interview with Australian Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, Australia’s proposed new national security legislation would address “not just the secrets that people might come into contact with, *but everything that surrounds it, forms part of that*”. (Emphasis added.) The 22 October 2022 *Daily Mail* reported “that as all the members of Five Eyes—the intelligence-sharing network comprising the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States—were affected by the scandal, *a joint strategy was required to deal with it, with every state agreeing the same measures* .” (Emphasis added.)

### **Next—Daniel Duggan’s arrest part of coordinated Five Eyes campaign**

*By Melissa Harrison, Australian Alert Service, 12 July 2023*

Today, things are different. For while the former RAF officer remains gainfully employed in the aviation industry, his recent endeavours engender scorn, rather than envy. To former comrades, he’s no longer a hero.

Why so? Earlier this week the British government released a ‘threat alert’ about former British fighter pilots who are signing up to help train the Chinese equivalent of the RAF.



**Former RAF top gun Keith Hartley has been at the centre of Beijing’s recruitment drive of British pilots**

In an unprecedented move, officials warned that as many as 30 UK Top Guns have taken huge fees to moonlight for Beijing, potentially threatening our national security in the process.

A screenshot from the 22 October 2022 *Daily Mail* coverage.