

Britain: Troops died in Iraq as a result of equipment shortages

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Britain's defence secretary Geoff Hoon has come under sustained attack over the failure of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to adequately equip troops sent to Iraq.

Hoon was already set to be a political fall guy, shouldering the blame for the death of whistleblower Dr. David Kelly—the man named as the source of BBC reports of unhappiness within the security services over the government's intelligence dossiers on Iraq. But his troubles have intensified after Iraq war widow Samantha Roberts told the media that her husband's death was the result of being instructed to relinquish his body armour to an infantryman, judged to be more at risk.

Sergeant Steven Roberts, 33, was with the 2nd Royal Tank Regiment when he was shot dead at Zubayr, near Basra, on March 24 while confronting Iraqi protesters. A Ministry of Defence report showed that only days before, Sgt. Roberts was issued with body armour, but was told to hand it back as there were not enough to go around. A pathologist's report found that the bullet would have been stopped by an armoured body vest, but Roberts had been left with standard armour. To add insult to injury, Sgt. Roberts was apparently killed by so-called "friendly fire."

This much was already known, but last week Mrs. Roberts, 32, from West Yorkshire, released her husband's audio diary to the press—given to her by her father-in-law on the day of Roberts's funeral. In it, Sgt. Roberts called supplies to soldiers "a joke" and the shortages "disgraceful."

In his entry for March 13, Sgt. Roberts said, "General [Sir Michael] Jackson last week turned round and said 'yes, we are ready to go' and our vehicles were still in the boats ready to come into port, so what a blatant lie that was."

On March 15, he said, "As I have written in your letter we have now got absolutely nothing. It is disgraceful what we have got out here."

On March 21, after war had begun, he said, "I have not got my combats yet. Things we have been told we are going to get, we're not and it's disheartening because we know we are going to go to war without the correct equipment."

With interest in the report of the inquiry by Lord Hutton into Kelly's death—to be made public on January 28—at its height, the media seized on the story with both hands. Mrs. Roberts was interviewed by newspapers, radio and TV, and called for

Hoon to resign "for the good of the country" because he had "blood on his hands."

Hoon said he was "extremely sorry" for the death and "extremely sorry" Sgt. Roberts did not have enhanced body armour. But he rejected calls by the Conservatives for his resignation. He said that enhanced body armour had been issued for as many troops as possible, but some of the 38,000 sets sent had not reached units before the war began. Therefore, priority had been given to infantry units.

Hoon also told parliament that he had given Mrs. Roberts a confidential report on her husband's death during a long discussion with her, an assertion she denied. She told the press that Hoon "told the Commons he had given me a confidential report on what had happened on March 24. He has given me nothing. He told MPs he had personally scheduled a meeting with me. He has set no date for that meeting. He left me speechless. I recognised nothing of what he said as being close to what I know to be the truth."

Hoon held a meeting with Mrs. Roberts on Monday, January 19, but his assurances of concern at the death of her husband and "the other 55 men who have died since combat operations began in Iraq" did nothing to placate her.

The revelations concerning Sgt. Roberts's death also led to other stories emerging of troops dying or suffering due to lack of essential equipment.

Corporal Dewi Pritchard was a Territorial Army soldier killed last year while serving with 116 Provost Company Royal Military Police during an attack by gunmen on his vehicle in Basra on August 23.

He did not have a fully protected armoured car, and his family said he was a "sitting duck" in the civilian Nissan 4x4 that was serving as a patrol car.

Liberal Democrat MP Mike Hancock also reported a letter sent anonymously by a senior reservist officer to the Defence Select Committee, alleging that a soldier's leg was amputated after yet another "friendly fire" incident—only because army field surgeons lacked vital equipment. The letter concerns Sergeant Albert Thomson, 35, of the 1st Battalion Royal Highland Fusiliers. It states, "The soldier received four bullet wounds into the upper leg. The doctor was particularly angry that if his team had had a vascular repair kit, which they did not

have, they would have been able to redeem that young soldier's leg. As it happened, they had to take his leg off."

Vascular repair kits apparently cost as little as £50. The letter also stated that Thomson was kept waiting for two-and-a-half hours before being airlifted to hospital.

Thomson told the *Guardian* of his shock at the reports. He had not been contacted by the MP before his Commons statement. He always believed that doctors could do nothing to save his leg, and his family has now hired a solicitor.

The pro-Conservative press has used the latest revelations to maximise Prime Minister Tony Blair's political difficulties. The *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, for example, have all called for Hoon's resignation.

The pro-Labour press is divided, with the *Independent* calling for resignation and the *Guardian* defending Hoon as having acted properly. But Labour's backers may at least take cold comfort from the fact that the focus of attention has switched onto someone who is already an obvious casualty of the Hutton inquiry and away from Blair himself.

Politically, Hoon is already one of the walking dead. Dr. Kelly's widow, Janice, and his family had previously described Hoon's alleged remarks that the weapons inspector was "no martyr and took his own life for fear of being exposed as a liar" as "despicable" and "almost too much to bear." If anyone leaves the government as a result of the Hutton inquiry, then it will be Hoon. He is not only expendable, but high profile enough for his departure to help shield Blair from calls for his own resignation.

Whatever happens in the next week or so, however, the fate of Sgt. Roberts, Cpl. Pritchard and Sgt. Thomson must serve to politically educate those who, if even for one moment, believed the patriotic guff that was used to justify the Iraq war and silence its critics.

Anyone opposing the war once it had been declared was accused of at best undermining or even betraying those sent to fight in Iraq. And a whole number of Labour MPs who had initially made a show of opposition to the war justified their return to the fold with the claim that they felt honour-bound to support "our boys" once war had been decided on.

Now we can see the real attitude of the ruling elite to the men and women they send to be maimed and killed in pursuit of their predatory global ambitions. When Sgt. Roberts's audio letter to his wife brought the plight of many of Britain's soldiers to national attention, the government naturally went into damage-limitation mode. Hoon, Blair and others expressed their sorrow and regret at Roberts's death. Only Defence Minister Ivor Caplin was wildly off-message when he spoke of the "odd glitch or shortcoming" in the provision of protective equipment in Iraq. But facts, as they say, are stubborn things.

This is not the first time that military equipment shortages that endangered the lives of troops in Iraq have been acknowledged. On December 11 of last year, the public spending watchdog, the National Audit Office (NAO), issued a

report to Parliament admitting that Britain's invasion force lacked vital equipment and could not be properly called combat-ready.

This included items as diverse as sophisticated body armour and protection against chemical or biological attack, and more basic items such as desert boots and clothing.

Directly relating to the tragic fate of Sgt. Roberts, the NAO said there were an "insufficient number" of body armour sets at least partly because no one knew where the supplies were located! Up to 200,000 sets, each costing £170, had been issued since the war in Kosovo in 1999 but "seem to have disappeared."

A large number of soldiers did not even have desert fatigues and fought the entire war in black boots and green uniforms. The forces were short about 54,000 sets of desert trousers and jackets and 18,000 desert boots.

Of even greater significance, given the government's claims that Iraq possessed a range of "weapons of mass destruction," was the lack of protection against nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) attack.

Some tanks and other armoured vehicles had no NBC protection filters fitted. Many troops did not have NBC suits. There was a shortage of about 40 percent of nerve agent detection systems, and the entire stock of around 4,000 residual vapour detectors used to monitor residual chemicals after an attack did not work.

The report explains that soldiers responded by seizing equipment wherever they could get hold of it, leading to a "considerable degree of misappropriation of equipment and stores moving through the supply chain."

Problems were made worse by pressure from the Treasury to keep costs down and the policy of the MOD to only keep a limited stock of equipment. This meant that very few of the special body armour suits meant to be provided to all troops had even been manufactured.



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