# Pentagon lies exposed over killing of reporters in Baghdad

**Mike Head**
**19 January 2004**

An investigation by Reporters Without Borders into the United States military's killing of two news cameramen at Baghdad's Palestine Hotel last April raises a series of new questions about their deaths, as well as the wider casualties inflicted on reporters by US forces during the war on Iraq.

The detailed report, *Two Murders and a Lie*, demonstrates that the Pentagon and the Bush administration lied repeatedly about why an American tank deliberately opened fire on the hotel last April 8. The high explosive shell killed Ukrainian cameramen Taras Protsyuk (of Reuters news agency), aged 35, and 37-year-old Spaniard José Couso (of the Spanish TV station Telecinco). Three other members of the media corps stationed in the hotel were seriously wounded.

It was the second direct hit within two hours on a building known to house international journalists. Al-Jazeera correspondent Tariq Ayoub, a 34-year-old Palestinian Jordanian, was killed in a missile strike on the Arab-language broadcaster's Baghdad offices. Surviving Al-Jazeera staff sought shelter in the nearby offices of rival satellite station Abu Dhabi TV, which then also came under US attack.

The attacks came at a vital point in the invasion. US forces were blasting their way toward the centre of the Iraqi capital, where Washington was anxious to claim victory in the conquest of the country. Broadcasts from the Palestine Hotel's journalists, who had defied Pentagon warnings not to remain in the capital, had showed some of the widespread mass killings being conducted by US troops in Baghdad's streets.

The next day, April 9, a US tank pulled down Saddam Hussein's statue in Firdos Square, just below the hotel, cheered by a handpicked crowd. Despite the carefully stage-managed character of the event, footage and photographs of the statue's toppling were beamed around the world and became the symbol of the regime's fall.

French journalist Jean-Paul Mari investigated the attack on the hotel for Reporters Without Borders, with help from the French weekly magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. He gathered evidence from journalists in the hotel at the time, from others "embedded" with the US Army units that fired on the hotel and from the American soldiers and officers directly involved. Only one media organisation refused his requests for information: Rupert Murdoch's Fox News.

Mari records that Pentagon officials, speaking barely an hour after the fatal incident, immediately stated that an M1 Abrams tank opened fire on the hotel in response to "enemy fire" coming from the hotel or the area around it. They accused the Saddam Hussein regime of being responsible for the deaths by operating snipers from the hotel. These false claims were maintained at the highest official level in the days that followed, despite numerous accounts from surviving journalists denying that any shots had been fired from the hotel.

On April 8, the Pentagon insisted: "We have reports of Iraqi snipers in the vicinity of the hotel, operating from the hotel, proving that this desperate and dying regime will stop at nothing to cling to power." Less than two hours after the shelling, General Buford Blount, the commander of the 3rd Infantry Division (3ID), whose tank fired the shot, said: "A tank was receiving small arms and RPG fire from the hotel and engaged the target with one round."

This lie was amplified in Washington the next day. Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke stated: "Our forces came under fire. They exercised their inherent right to self-defence." Vice-President Dick Cheney declared that the suggestion that US troops had deliberately attacked journalists was "obviously totally false ... You'd have to be an idiot to believe that ... The attack on the hotel was simply the result of troops responding to what they perceived to be threats against them."

However, the official line was partially contradicted by the soldiers involved, who later spoke to several journalists. Sergeant Shawn Gibson, the tank gunner who fired the fatal shot, and his immediate superior, Captain Philip Wolford, who authorised it, denied they had fired because of shooting from the hotel. They said the 4-64 Armor Company of the 3ID's 2nd Brigade, which was stationed on the Al-Jumhuriya Bridge soon after US troops entered Baghdad, was seeking to neutralise an alleged Iraqi "spotter" monitoring and reporting on US military activity. They aimed their fire at individuals with lenses or binoculars on a hotel balcony, from where some of the media were filming.

Gibson and Wolford emphatically denied knowing, or being told by their superiors, that reporters were stationed in the hotel. Three embedded journalists attached to the 3ID confirmed that their units appeared not to have been informed that the Palestine Hotel had become the media's headquarters. One, Chris Anderson, a freelance photographer working for a photo agency, said his unit was told that the journalists were still at the Rashid Hotel, the former site of the Iraqi information press centre. In fact, on Pentagon advice that the Rashid Hotel would be targetted, the media corps had shifted to the Palestine Hotel three weeks earlier.

Reporters in the hotel reiterated that they and their employers had informed the Pentagon of their precise location and had been assured by the Pentagon that they would be safe. Associated Press photographer Jerome Delay had received a message from the Pentagon, saying "Don't worry we know you are there." Mari notes that General Blount's 3ID headquarters had ample access to information from the Pentagon, from the US Central Command Doha base (in Qatar) and from the media.

The report comments: "It is inconceivable that the massive presence of journalists at the hotel for three weeks prior to the shelling, which was known by any TV viewer and by the Pentagon itself, could have passed unnoticed. Yet this presence was never mentioned to the troops in the field or marked on the maps used by artillery support soldiers. The question is whether this information was withheld deliberately, out of contempt or through negligence."

The report concludes that the deaths were a case of "criminal negligence" and "not therefore a deliberate attack on journalists or the media". It finds that: "At the top level, the US government must bear some of the responsibility. Not just because it is the government and has supreme authority over its army in the field, but also because its top

© World Socialist Web Site

leaders several times made false statements about the incident. They also talked regularly about the dangers journalists faced in Iraq."

Reporters Without Borders has demanded the re-opening of the US Army's inquiry into the incident. The Army's cursory, seven-paragraph report, released last August 12, completely exonerated all military personnel. "They fired a single shell in self-defense in full accordance with the Rules of Engagement," it concluded. The report amended the official line slightly. It did not speak of direct shooting from the Palestine Hotel but of an "enemy hunter/killer team" operating from the hotel. Thus, the Pentagon's initial lie was enhanced and made more vague.

Despite Mari's report, there are good reasons to doubt that the killings simply resulted from official negligence and to conclude that a re-opened military inquiry would only produce another whitewash report. Several basic questions must be posed.

1. If the incident were merely a terrible mistake, why did the Bush administration, from Cheney down, go to such lengths to lie about it? Mari records that US Secretary of State Colin Powell twice restated the original false claim well after the event, including at a Madrid press conference last May 1. "Young American soldiers trying to liberate that part of the city came under enemy fire and their lives were in danger so they responded," Powell asserted.

2. First-hand accounts by Palestine Hotel reporters pointed to a calculated, unhurried attack. France 3 TV footage showed US tanks deliberately firing at the hotel. "They (US tanks) headed there, moved their turrets and waited at least two minutes before opening fire," said Herve de Ploeg, the journalist who filmed the attack. "It was not a case of instinctive firing.... I'm very specific because I was due to go on air."

3. How can the claim of mistake be squared with the intentional strike on the Al Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV offices just before the Palestine Hotel was shelled? As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported at the time, the strike on Al-Jazeera's broadcasting facilities was undoubtedly deliberate. Al-Jazeera had written to US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld last February 23 giving the precise location of its office so as to avoid being targetted.

It seems that Washington has simply refused to investigate this act of murder. Reporters Without Borders filed a Freedom of Information request with the Pentagon last October for the results of any inquiry into Tariq Ayoub's death. No reply has been received.

4. Why did the White House and the Pentagon warn journalists not to remain in Baghdad, or try to operate independently anywhere in Iraq once the invasion started? White House spokesman Ari Fleischer stressed last February 28 the Pentagon's advice to the media to pull their journalists out of Baghdad. Asked whether this was a veiled threat to "non-embedded" reporters, he said: "If the military says something, I strongly urge all journalists to heed it. It is in your own interests, and your family's interests. And I mean that."

The official responses to the Palestine Hotel killings were laced with similar comments. On April 8, for example, while expressing "deep regret" for "the loss of any innocent civilian life," Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said Baghdad was "a dangerous place for journalists" and accused the Iraqi government of "intentionally putting civilians in danger". The Army's August 12 document echoed this line: "Baghdad was a high intensity combat area and some journalists had elected to remain there despite repeated warnings of the extreme danger of doing so."

Before launching the Iraq war, the Bush administration established an unprecedented regime of embedded journalism. In the guise of allowing greater coverage of the battlefield, the system's rules and logistics were designed to ensure favourable, sanitised and monitored reportage of the US-led operation. Some 600 reporters, predominantly from the few countries participating in the US-led coalition, were assigned to specific military units. This arrangement meant they could make no independent assessment of the war or the casualties being inflicted on Iraqi soldiers and civilians.

5. The deaths in Baghdad were part of a wider pattern. The International Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and the European Broadcasting Union condemned numerous instances in which non-embedded journalists were fired upon, detained or roughed up by US soldiers. No less than 12 were killed in action, at least five by US troops.

They included British ITV journalist Terry Lloyd, who was killed near Basra, apparently by US fire, last March 22. Lloyd, one of the few non-embedded journalists who managed to enter Iraq in the early days of the war, was heading toward Basra, which coalition commanders had falsely reported was under their control. Two of Lloyd's team, cameramen Fred Nerac and translator Hussein Osman, are officially still missing. Daniel Demoustier, a French cameraman injured in the same attack, accused US troops of firing on their media vehicles to "wipe out troublesome witnesses".

6. There is every reason to conclude that the pressure to silence non-embedded voices increased as the battle for Baghdad reached its climax on April 8 and 9. Dispatches filed from the Palestine Hotel observed that the soldiers seemed unprepared for the fierce, urban guerilla type resistance they had encountered for days. Other reports indicated that hundreds of people were being indiscriminately mowed down by tanks and armoured vehicles in various Baghdad suburbs.

7. Attacks on journalists still continue in Iraq. In one incident, two US tanks opened fire at close range on a Palestinian-born Reuters cameraman outside a notorious US-run jail in Baghdad on August 17. Mazen Dana, 43, a highly respected and award-winning media representative, was fatally wounded in the chest and bled to death on the spot. Dana was with a group of journalists in clearly marked vehicles. Colleagues who witnessed the killing immediately rejected US military command claims that its soldiers mistook the camera he was holding for a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

A month later, the Pentagon also described his death as "regrettable" while insisting that troops had acted within the rules of engagement. It has also failed to reply to a Freedom of Information request for further information on this case.

These ongoing killings point to an orchestrated campaign to intimidate journalists and suppress unvetted coverage of the Iraq operation. All the media victims were attempting to operate outside the "embedded" regime adopted by Washington, with the willing collaboration of the major media conglomerates. It is clear that no inquiry by the military can be trusted to reveal the truth. There must be a genuinely independent inquiry into the entire edifice of official deception surrounding the Iraq war, leading to the criminal prosecution of those in Washington responsible for war crimes.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**

© World Socialist Web Site