Britain: More questions on Dr Kelly's death as a confidante rejects suicide claim

Chris Marsden
30 January 2004

The January 25 *Mail on Sunday* ran an interview with Mai Pederson, a United States Air Force translator who worked alongside Dr David Kelly in Iraq. In it she reiterated her earlier claim that the government scientist had received death threats because of his work in Iraq and her surprise that he had died apparently as a result of taking 20 painkillers before slashing his wrist. Pederson reported that Kelly had an aversion to swallowing tablets and had spoken to her shortly before his death of his plans for the future.

Kelly was a United Nations weapons inspector who was the source of the BBC report that Britain's Labour government had "sexed-up" its intelligence dossiers to justify a pre-emptive US-led attack on Iraq. He was found dead in remote woods near his home on July 18, after being named by the government as a whistleblower and being forced to give evidence to two parliamentary inquiries.

Evidence given to the judicial inquiry under Lord Hutton into Kelly's death generally accepted that Kelly had committed suicide. But Pederson was never called to give evidence to the Hutton Inquiry and has never accepted that Kelly killed himself.

The *Mail's* report makes clear that it is hard to conceive of an innocent explanation for the failure to call Pederson, given the closeness of her relationship with Kelly and the controversy that her views would have fuelled. A right-wing newspaper that is politically hostile to Prime Minister Tony Blair and his government, the *Mail* has been almost alone amongst the generally pro-Blair mainstream media in pursuing the illusive Ms. Pederson.

Pederson was questioned by Thames Valley Police after Kelly's death, but was one of five witnesses who refused to allow their statements to be passed on to Lord Hutton. She was mentioned once at the inquiry on September 1 last year when Mrs Janice Kelly testified that she was "quite influential" in converting her husband to the Baha'i faith and "later became a family friend".

On the morning that Janice Kelly gave evidence, later editions of the pro-Blair *Times* newspaper of Rupert Murdoch ran a report noting Mai Pederson's importance in the life of Dr Kelly. The *Mail* noted shortly after that the *Times'* story was printed only in a few thousand copies and then dropped.

Two issues can possibly account for Pederson's disappearance. The first is the potential embarrassment caused by what she had to say. In her initial statement to the police she said Dr Kelly had told her he would "never" commit suicide and that he feared he would be found "dead in the woods" because of the nature of his work, of which she says more in her interview with the *Mail*.

But just as significant may be her own biography. To the extent that Pederson's existence has even been acknowledged, she has been described variously as a "spiritual adviser" to Kelly, a translator for the US Air Force and Janice Kelly's "family friend". But there is a mass of evidence suggesting that Mai Pederson was and remains a US spy and that her relationship to Kelly was more intimate than many would like to acknowledge.

Several articles in the *Mail* and elsewhere piece together some of Pederson's background. She was born Mai al-Sadat in Kuwait, but became a US citizen and has been married twice. Her fluency in Arabic, German and French is said to have impressed her employers at the Pentagon and a US Defence Department insider states, "She was given a top secret clearance, and one of her first jobs was translating military documents.... Subsequently, she became a translator and 'tour guide' escorting other undercover operatives on assignments in the Middle East."

She struck up a close friendship with Dr Kelly when they were both serving with a UN weapons inspection team in Iraq in 1998 in her role as an Arabic inspection USAF sergeant. She converted him to the Baha'i faith in 1999.

Pederson's first husband is Cameron DeHart, a former US Special Forces combat controller. Her second ex-husband, US Airforce Sergeant James Pederson, has told friends that she was a 'spook' trained to cultivate anyone who might be able to help her in her intelligence work.

He is on record as explaining that he was not surprised that she became a friend of David Kelly. "Part of her military training was to cultivate anyone who might be able to help her in her intelligence work.

"It may well have been why she zeroed in on Dr Kelly. She undoubtedly viewed him as a potential intelligence source. The two things that obsessed her were the military and the Baha'i faith."

James Pederson is reported as telling friends that his ex wife "has always been a spook of one kind of or another.... The marriage never stood much of a chance from the start. Mai was always going away for months at a time. She was proficient with a gun and in basic unarmed combat and worked undercover for long periods called TDA for Temporary Duty Attachments—in Egypt and I believe Iran. She was a very complex character."

After the couple separated Mai Pederson became a language instructor at the Defense Language Institute, a spy school the US Air Force runs in Monterey, California. She also appears to have worked at the Pentagon's internal staff directory.

Kelly, Britain's top weapons inspector, would have been a prime target for a US operative to cultivate—as the Bush administration was anxious to ensure that UN reports did not counteract its propaganda on Iraq's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction and to discredit them if they did.

Not long after they struck up a relationship Kelly began to appear at Baha'i meetings in Monterey, accompanied by Pederson.

When it appeared that she would be called to give evidence to Hutton the *Mail* reported, "Pederson appeared to be in hiding, with US officials at the Maxwell Gunter US Air Force base in Alabama, where Sgt Pederson was now stationed, refusing to comment on the inquiry."

The closeness of their relationship and Pederson's intelligence connections may account for the fact that she was amongst the very first to become aware of Kelly's death. Marilyn Von Berg, a Monterey resident

© World Socialist Web Site

who was secretary of the area's Baha'i assembly when Kelly visited the area, said that she had been contacted by Pederson: "She phoned us and said he had been found,' insisting that Von Berg and her other friends "shouldn't believe what we would be reading in the newspapers."

Pederson's interview with the *Mail on Sunday* raises many questions that throw doubt on the official explanation of his death as resulting from suicide. And it also leaves just as many questions unanswered.

She tells the *Mail*, "I told the police that the fact that he was found dead in the woods was not surprising. The fact that they said he committed suicide was. I am a logically-minded person and it doesn't make any sense to me."

Dr Kelly had told her how his mother had committed suicide: "There is research to show that suicide runs in families and I asked him if he would ever do that and he said, 'Good God no, I couldn't imagine ever doing that ... I would never do it."

She added, "I also told the police about the time he said he had a headache. I suggested he take Tylenol. He said he had a problem swallowing pills. It seems a bit strange that someone who can't take one pill for a splitting headache would be able to take 20."

Pederson also said that during his phone calls at the height of the controversy over the report on the "sexed up" intelligence dossier, "He didn't sound depressed. He sounded totally normal."

She also explained again how Kelly's "job was dangerous. He knew it could cost him his life."

Pederson makes clear how extraordinary it was that she never gave evidence to the Hutton inquiry. At the end of August last year, two British detectives had flown to interview her in Montgomery, Alabama because of the importance attached to what she had to say. And according to her Washington DC lawyer, Mark Zaid, her refusal to testify was due to the refusal of the Hutton inquiry to protect her from public scrutiny—as it had British security personnel:

"They wanted her to testify via video link. I asked them to block her image and voice because as a military person it was necessary for her safety and security. They had done it for MI5 or MI6 operatives but they said that they would be unable to do that for Mai because as a matter of policy there was a need to be open."

Pederson denied speculation that she had been romantically involved with Kelly and described her relationship with the 59-year-old married father of three as more like "brother and sister". *The Mail* notes, however, that in publicly available records Kelly's name was listed at three of her known addresses including her bungalow near Washington DC. The only official explanation offered for this is that Kelly "used one of her addresses to obtain credit."

It is clear that Kelly's employers within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) would not have been happy with his relationship with Pederson and would consider it a potentially serious breech of security, even if he were only the naive weapons inspector and civil servant he was portrayed as during the Hutton Inquiry. But the fact is that Kelly was a spy, who occupied a position at the very heart of the propaganda operation mounted by the security forces and the Blair government.

Kelly may have come to endorse certain criticisms within the security services of the weakest and least substantiated elements of the government's September 2002 security dossier—particularly the claim that Saddam Hussein could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes. But a revealing article in the January 25 *Sunday Times* by Nicholas Rufford, shows just how high a flyer Kelly was before his fall from grace.

In his article, "Spy, boffin, disgruntled civil servant: this was the David Kelly I knew," Rufford notes:

"Sometimes he was a consultant to the UN, sometimes a government scientist, sometimes an oracle on germ weapons to trusted journalists, sometimes an undercover man for the intelligence services.

"Technically, he was a Ministry of Defence (MoD) official. He worked as scientific adviser to the arms control directorate. But for many years he was also on loan to Unscom, the UN Special Commission on Iraq.

"When he went to Iraq, it was under the control of the Foreign Office. He worked closely with British intelligence, both the defence intelligence staff (DIS) and MI6."

After he became a weapons inspector in Iraq in 1994, "In London, Kelly became a key figure in an MoD unit called Operation Rockingham. Set up by John Morrison, deputy head of the DIS, its aim was to gather intelligence on Iraq from a multitude of sources and try to make sense of it. Sitting at the centre of a complex web of British and US intelligence organisations, the Rockingham cell became pivotal in the efforts to disarm Iraq.

"It guided inspection teams in Iraq to sites suspected of being used to hide weapons. It also advised the joint intelligence committee (JIC) that, in turn, reported to ministers."

Rufford cites the damaging criticisms of the Rockingham cell and of Kelly made by Scott Ritter, a former UN inspector who liaised with the cell. Essentially he asserts that its members wrote reports for the UN Security Council and were able to influence decisions on whether sanctions against Iraq continued. To this end, "Intelligence was selected or ignored depending on whether it supported the foreign policy of Britain and America, says Ritter, and Kelly was a key figure in that process."

Ritter states, "Kelly became Rockingham's go-to person for translating the data that came out of Unscom into concise reporting.... Kelly had a vested interest in protecting his image, which centred around his exposure of an Iraqi bio-weapons programme that had to continue to exist for him to continue to hold centre stage."

Kelly's role as a spy and what Ritter alleges were efforts to exaggerate the threat from Iraq do not contradict the fact that he later fell into a conflict with his employers and the government. Pederson notes, for example, that he was passed over by the UN as head of the bio-weapons investigation in Iraq in favour of Richard Spertzel, a US biologist. And in 1998, he was kicked out of Iraq and found himself officially occupying a much more junior position within the MoD fearing for his pension and facing public embarrassment as a result of the weakness of the security material on Iraq on which his own reputation rested.

Certain things can be said as a result of the revelations surrounding Mai Pederson and her relationship with Dr Kelly.

The Hutton Inquiry was given the narrow remit of investigating the circumstances surrounding Kelly's death in order to protect the government from broader and more embarrassing questions as to the lies employed in order to drag Britain into an illegal war of aggression against Iraq. But even if this remit is accepted, the investigation conducted into Kelly's demise was inadequate, acutely sensitive to the danger of revealing the extent of official intrigues against Iraq and Kelly's role in them—and heavily slanted in favour of arriving at a verdict of suicide.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site