

Britain: soldier opposed to Iraq war commits suicide

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23 August 2004

On August 10, the funeral of Private Peter Mahoney, a soldier with the Territorial Army (TA) who served for six months in the war against Iraq in 2003, was held at St. Aidan's church in his hometown of Carlisle, England.

On August 3, the 45-year-old father of four had committed suicide by gassing himself in his family car. He died of carbon monoxide poisoning after attaching a hosepipe to the exhaust of the car parked in his garage at his home in Botcherby, on the outskirts of Carlisle. Mahoney was wearing his old TA uniform and had shaved his head in a regulation military style.

He was discovered by Donna, his wife of 21 years and a staff nurse at the local Cumberland Infirmary. She called the emergency services, which were unable to revive him. An inquest into his death has been opened and adjourned.

In Iraq Mahoney was attached to the Royal Logistics Corps, responsible for taking medical supplies and injured soldiers between the front line and British Army field hospitals near the Kuwaiti border.

While Mahoney did not die in Iraq, his experiences there undoubtedly contributed to his suicide, making him another casualty of the criminal and illegal invasion by the United States and Britain.

Mahoney was profoundly disillusioned by his experiences in Iraq, which had confirmed his belief prior to and during the war that it was a war of aggression and that claims that Saddam Hussein possessed "weapons of mass destruction" were lies.

On July 16, following his return from the Persian Gulf, Mahoney gave an outspoken interview to his local newspaper condemning the war and the administrations of President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair for engaging in a war of plunder. His comments also indicate that his views

were shared by other soldiers that he was in contact with.

Mahoney told the newspaper: "The general consensus among the troops was that we were in Iraq so George Bush could seize control of the oil fields. All this talk of weapons of mass destruction was simply a smokescreen as far as we were concerned. There was certainly no evidence they existed. From what we saw Saddam's regime did not have advanced weapons. Iraqi troops were using ancient Russian machines. They were firing sticks and stones. They might as well have had catapults."

Mahoney continued, "I think Tony Blair was just following whatever Bush said. He was simply his puppet. He got in too deep and couldn't back out."

In his letter, Mahoney spoke about his plans for the future and of how he intended to leave the Armed Forces permanently. "I was considering leaving the TA before I went out there but I will definitely be leaving when my time is officially up in September. I will be happy to turn my back on the TA. It also gives my wife and children peace of mind."

Mahoney quit the Territorial Army in September and made plans to undertake employment at the local poultry factory. He eventually took up a job recycling waste as an employee of the local authority. He was also in the process of reconciliation with his wife who he planned to go on holiday with when he took his life. The couple had agreed to split five weeks before his suicide, following his descent into depression as a result of his war experiences.

Following his death, Donna spoke of how he had changed as a person following his time in Iraq. She said: "Iraq changed him. I don't know what happened because I wasn't in his head but it changed him. He was a broken man. I really don't know what happened

out there.”

Comparing photos of Peter before and after the war, she said: “You can see how he was and you can see how he changed. He was so lively before he went, so happy. Then when he came back—I don’t know—he’d lost his character.”

Despite showing signs of deepening depression he did not undergo treatment.

His wife, whose father had served in the Army for 24 years, also revealed that prior to her husband being called up to serve in the Iraq war in March 2003, she had written a letter to Blair stating that she did not agree with the war and neither did her husband. She asked Blair not to go ahead with the invasion and said in the letter, “He [Peter] volunteered to go to Bosnia in October 1998 because he thought it was a good idea. But this time it’s different. We just don’t understand the moral point of this war. It’s not justified. We’re just backing up George Bush—and we’ll be fighting somebody else’s battle.”

She kept a diary during the war and set up a local support group for other wives and families of other soldiers who were serving in Iraq. Two of the extracts from her diary reveal the stress and suffering it was placing on her and their four children.

On March 18, 2003, she wrote: “My eyes sting with the lack of sleep. My heart pounds with fear of the unknown and the ache for my husband Peter ... Please God, bring my baby home. Protect him and all the other soldiers over there.”

On March 21, 2003, she wrote: “We just hope this war will soon be over and we pray for our loved ones that they remain safe, and we pray for the people of Iraq—and the families of the 16 soldiers who died today.”

Mahoney’s suicide is not a unique event. At this point exact numbers of British soldiers who have committed suicide in Iraq or subsequently as a direct result of the war are not available in the UK. However, figures collated in the United States show a startling increase in the number of suicides of American soldiers who have served in Iraq and Kuwait in 2003. In that year at least 24 soldiers committed suicide in Iraq and the number may increase because the circumstances of some other deaths are still in doubt. The figures equate to a suicide rate of 17.3 per 100,000 soldiers, compared with a rate of 12.8 for the entire army in 2003 and an

average rate of 11.9 for the army during the 1995-2002 period.

The figures were released by a mental health assessment team that met with soldiers in Iraq and Kuwait between August and October and do not include soldiers who killed themselves after returning to the US. The team surveyed some 750 soldiers in Iraq and Kuwait and found that seven percent reported severe stress. Eighty percent of those surveyed had been engaged in combat since their arrival in Iraq.

The mental health assessment team was sent to Iraq following the suicides of five soldiers. At that time US soldiers were being killed daily as a result of an insurgency of the Iraqi people. Suicides of US soldiers remained at about two per month thereafter. Last year more than 10,000 US soldiers were evacuated from Iraq on medical grounds and between 300 and 400 of these were sent outside the country for treatment of mental health problems.



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