

Britain: growing opposition to occupation of Iraq as more Black Watch troops die

Robert Stevens
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On November 11, representatives of Military Families Against the War (MFAW), which comprises relatives of soldiers killed in Iraq as well as some of the families of those currently stationed there, held a protest at Downing Street, the London residence of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Five members of Scotland's 850-strong Black Watch regiment have now been killed and several others seriously wounded since their move north on October 27 from southern Iraq to Camp Dogwood, 20 miles (32 km) south west of Baghdad.

The protest was joined by Dante Zappala, a member of the US organisation, Military Families Speak Out. Zappala's brother, 30-year-old Sergeant Sherwood Baker, was killed in Baghdad while serving with the US army for the Iraq Survey Group.

The families were originally told they were not permitted to present their wreath, but following a determined protest, they laid their wreath outside Number 10 Downing Street and held a minute's silence. A letter to the prime minister demanded, "Stop the war, bring the troops home and hand responsibility over to the United Nations."

One of the group, Reg Keys, whose son Lance Corporal Thomas Keys, a member of the Royal Military Police, was killed in Al Majar al-Kabir, near Basra, last June said, "We want to bring some sanity to this lunacy. The war was based on lies, deceit and false information."

"We're supposed to be in Iraq to bring democracy—yet Tony Blair won't let the grieving relatives of soldiers who have died fighting his war to make a dignified protest. This makes me sick to the core."

Rose Gentle, whose 19-year-old son Gordon was killed by a roadside bomb near Basra in June, and

James Buchanan, whose two sons Craig, 24, and Gary, 27, are serving with the Black Watch, were also present.

During a press conference after the wreath laying ceremony, James Buchanan made a strident attack on the government, accusing it of lying for weeks over its intention to move the Black Watch in order to free up US marines for the assault on Fallujah.

Referring to Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon Buchanan said, "This man has got me so angry. If I see him in the street I would kill him. I would kill that man. I would cut his throat."

His anger is indicative of the growing opposition to the use of British troops in Iraq. Earlier this week, as the first deaths amongst the Black Watch regiment filtered out, the *Times* newspaper reported that a survey conducted by the Populus poll organisation had shown that three-fifths of Britons surveyed were opposed to the war—the highest number yet.

The *Times* reported, "In a worrying sign for the Government, support for the war among Labour voters has fallen sharply in the past month", and that "exactly half the electorate says that Iraq will be 'a significant factor' in deciding votes at the next election."

The Black Watch began their move 380 miles north on October 27. Within 48 hours of arriving at their new base, the regiment suffered its first fatalities. The dead include Sergeant Stuart Gray, 31, Private Paul Lowe, 19 and Private Scott McArdle, 22, all from Fife, Scotland who were killed in a suicide bomb attack on November 4. An Iraqi translator was also killed in the incident and eight other soldiers were injured. Private Pita Tukatukawaqa, 27, died on November 8 when a roadside bomb hit his Warrior armoured vehicle.

Their deaths make a total of 74 British service personnel killed since the invasion of Iraq—42 of them

after the US took control of Baghdad in April 2003.

Private Lowe had sent an email to his family just days before his death in which he said, “I just want to get home.” Lowe’s younger brother Craig, 18, himself recently returned from a spell with the Black Watch in Basra, condemned the war. Craig Lowe said his brother had thought President George W. Bush “was an a-hole for starting the war over nothing, trying to get the money and oil. That’s what we thought ourselves... He thought they shouldn’t be there, they should all just be back here because it’s a war which nobody knows why it was started or what it was done for.”

Such comments have created something of a panic in ruling circles. All the lying justifications given for the war against Iraq have been exposed. The invasion had nothing to do with “liberating” Iraq, but was aimed at subjugating the country and its people in a war of colonial plunder. Now ruling circles in Britain are determined that all opposition to its plans within Iraq must be crushed, hence the decision to redeploy Black Watch so as to enable the US to concentrate its forces on the bloody suppression of Fallujah.

But domestically the government and the military have portrayed the redeployment as a temporary measure, of no real significance, with Blair famously pledging that the Black Watch would be “home for Christmas”.

The need for such duplicity has given media coverage of the occupation a schizophrenic character. On the one hand, it has played up the importance of British troops in Iraq, and the role of Black Watch in particular.

Press reports have eulogised the regiment’s 250-year history and its motto, “Nemo me impune lacessit” [No one attacks me with Impunity]. Black Watch commander, Lt Col James Cowan, declared, “Frankly, this regiment beat Napoleon, beat the Kaiser and beat Hitler. For the Jocks of the Black Watch this is just the latest chapter in our history and another job to be done.”

Black Watch, however, are not being deployed against imperial opponents or dictators. And for obvious reasons Cowen also failed to mention one of the regiment’s other historical “chapters”—its role in the Britain’s first occupation of Iraq, in 1917 when it invaded and seized the town of Tikrit. What is clear is that many soldiers and their families do not support a return to such imperialist military adventures and the

cost this extracts in both Iraqi and British lives.



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