

# The death of Pat Tillman: military mythmaking and the “war on terror”

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George Bush’s “global war on terror”—GWOT in Pentagon-speak—has produced no military heroes. Day after day, in Iraq and Afghanistan, American soldiers engage in largely one-sided combat. They are injured, maimed or killed by improvised explosive devices, mortar shells or booby traps without ever encountering face-to-face the insurgents fighting against US occupation. When they do locate a supposed enemy, the fighting is even more one-sided: attack helicopters, fighter jets and artillery are mobilized and an immense volume of precision-guided firepower obliterates the target.

Neither kind of warfare, low-tech ambush or high-tech incineration, is conducive to the kind of glorification of individual heroism employed in past American wars to boost morale among the soldiers and maintain support among the civilian population at home. That hasn’t stopped the Pentagon and the American media from trying, although with little success.

Last year there was the Jessica Lynch affair. A young woman serving in a support unit which took a wrong turn in Nasiriya and lost its way in the early stages of the invasion of Iraq, Lynch was captured in an Iraqi ambush that killed a half dozen of her comrades. Two weeks later, she was rescued by a special military extraction team that filmed its own exploit for propaganda purposes.

The US media eagerly took its cue from the military and went to work, latching onto Lynch’s ordeal to promote a war that had been launched in the teeth of massive opposition and had, in its initial stages, gone badly.

Leading the way was the *Washington Post*, the newspaper of record in the nation’s capital, which published a lengthy, sensational and wildly inaccurate account of Lynch’s alleged heroism, depicting her as a young tigress from West Virginia who fought off the Iraqi ambushers, firing off round after round until her ammunition ran out. According to this and other even more embellished accounts, Lynch was shot either during or after her capture and was possibly raped by the Iraqi fighters, members of Saddam Hussein’s Fedayeen.

Every element of this story turned out to be untrue. Lynch was captured after her unit came under fire, but she herself never fired a shot, as her gun had jammed. Her injuries occurred when the vehicle in which she was riding crashed. The Iraqis, far from shooting or abusing her, pulled her from the wreckage and took her to the Nasiriya hospital, where she was well treated by doctors and nurses who saved her life. When the US extraction unit arrived to “rescue” her, they encountered no military resistance, as Iraqi forces had largely abandoned the city.

Lynch herself seemed mortified by the intense and false media campaign surrounding her alleged heroics. She conducted herself with dignity and, nursing injuries that left her largely disabled, retired from

the military and married. No serious explanation was given, either by the Pentagon, the *Post* or any other media outlet, for the gargantuan lies they had peddled about the girl-hero of Nasiriya.

This year’s war propaganda fiasco is the case of Pat Tillman. A professional athlete making a seven-figure salary with the Arizona Cardinals of the National Football League, Tillman enlisted in the military several months after the September 11 terrorist attacks, along with his younger brother Kevin. Both qualified for the Army Rangers, one of the elite special forces units that were dispatched first to Iraq, where both Tillmans saw combat, and then to Afghanistan, to participate in the ongoing war with guerrillas loyal to the former Taliban regime.

On April 22, 2004, Tillman was killed in a firefight on a ridge in eastern Afghanistan. He was instantly hailed as a paragon of American patriotism and heroism, a man who not only sacrificed his life for his country, but even more impressively—at least in the minds of the Pentagon and its media propagandists—gave up millions of dollars to do so.

Tillman was posthumously awarded the Silver Star, the second highest military decoration for valor, with a citation declaring that he had lost his life trying to protect his men. At his funeral service, Senator John McCain of Arizona was the most prominent speaker, along with Tillman’s ex-teammate, former Cardinals quarterback Jake Plummer. Tillman was portrayed as a casualty of the war on terror, gunned down by the terrorists of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

A month later, Lt. Gen. Philip R. Kensinger Jr., head of the Special Operations Command, called a news conference to disclose that Tillman “probably” died by friendly fire. He refused to answer questions. There the matter rested, with little or nothing in the press, despite efforts by the Tillman family to uncover the truth.

Beginning on December 5 of this year, the *Washington Post* published a two-part series on Tillman’s death, with information obtained through interviews with many of his comrades and from the internal Army investigation. The newspaper reported: “Tillman died unnecessarily after botched communications, a mistaken decision to split his platoon over the objections of its leader, and negligent shooting by pumped-up young Rangers—some in their first firefight—who failed to identify their targets as they blasted their way out of a frightening ambush.”

According to the detailed *Post* account, the Tillmans’ unit, 2nd Platoon, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, also known as the “Black Sheep,” was in the tenth day of a sweep near Khost in Paktia province, near the border with Pakistan, looking for Al Qaeda or Taliban fighters. One of the nine vehicles carrying the platoon, a Humvee, had a broken fuel pump, and the platoon

commander, Lt. David Uthlaut, had called in for a replacement part. The platoon mechanic, however, could not fix the vehicle, which finally broke down.

Over Uthlaut's objection, a senior commander at the Rangers' operation center at Bagram Air Base outside of Kabul ordered him to divide his platoon of 34 men in half, sending one group ahead to reach the day's objective, a village called Manah, and leaving the remainder to guard the broken-down vehicle and await a local Afghan tow-truck driver. The *Post* account suggests that reaching Manah had no military purpose, since the unit would arrive too late to conduct operations, but would allow military higher-ups to record another objective achieved.

The lieutenant left his platoon's heaviest weapon, a .50-caliber machine gun, with the group staying with the Humvee, commanded by Sgt. Greg Baker, who were more vulnerable to ambush. Uthlaut pushed on towards Manah. The Tillman brothers also split up: Pat went with Uthlaut, while Kevin remained behind with Baker.

The second unit proceeded down a different road from the first, but when the tow truck found the going too rough, Baker turned back and began to follow the same path the first group had taken towards Manah. The two groups were not in radio contact because of the high mountains and steep canyon walls.

Entering one canyon, Baker's unit was hit by several explosions, either mortars, land mines or roadside bombs. According to the *Post* account, the soldiers had fallen into an ambush and saw Afghan attackers on the ridge above them. They opened fire and then forced their way through the canyon, guns blazing.

Meanwhile, Uthlaut's group, hearing the gunfire, moved toward the sound, with Tillman leading one of three fire teams sent ahead to find out what was happening. They climbed a ridge, Tillman accompanied by another young Ranger and an Afghan militia fighter. Tillman was pressing forward. As far as he knew, his younger brother might be in an ambush.

As Baker's unit emerged from the canyon, several soldiers saw Tillman's Afghan companion, and mistook the bearded man for a Taliban. They opened fire with the heavy machine gun at a range of only 100 meters, killing the Afghan. Tillman tried to save his comrade, waving his arms and attracting more gun fire, which killed him as well.

Other soldiers from the first unit brought the engagement to a stop by firing flares and smoke grenades to identify themselves. Among those wounded were Uthlaut and his radio operator, who had been trying to communicate with the second unit.

Kevin Tillman arrived on the scene after his brother's death. Mercifully, he had played no role in the shooting, serving as the rearguard of the second unit. He was told to take guard duty over the battlefield, and only later was told that his brother had been killed. It would be another five weeks before he learned that Pat had been killed by his own comrades.

According to the *Post* account, the Pentagon seized on Tillman's death as an opportunity to tell a heroic story. The newspaper wrote: "[H]is superiors exaggerated his actions and invented details as they burnished his legend in public, at the same time suppressing details that might tarnish Tillman's commanders."

The Pentagon statement awarding Tillman a posthumous Silver Star for combat valor declared: "He ordered his team to dismount and then maneuvered the Rangers up a hill near the enemy's location... As they crested the hill, Tillman directed his team into firing positions and personally provided suppressive fire... Tillman's voice was heard issuing commands to take the fight to the enemy forces."

When this statement was released, on April 30, 2004, the soldiers in the 2nd Platoon had already filed reports confirming that Tillman was a victim of friendly fire brought on by battlefield confusion and lack of communication. At least 14 sworn statements had been taken from the platoon, including one which quoted Tillman's last words: "Cease fire! Friendlies!" He was shouting on the battlefield, not to rally his men against an enemy attack, but to convey to the "enemy" that they were shooting fellow Americans.

At a public memorial ceremony in San Jose, California on May 3, Army officers who knew the cause of Tillman's death gave no hint of it, either to Senator McCain, the main speaker, or to any member of the Tillman family.

Mary Tillman, Pat's mother, pressed the Pentagon repeatedly for the details after she learned that friendly fire was involved. The military has not even confirmed that a formal investigation is under way, but some lower-level soldiers in the 2nd Platoon have reportedly faced disciplinary action. No officers have been charged.

According to another report, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, the initial account of the "friendly fire" killing is also being challenged. The newspaper reported that the incident was not triggered by an ambush by Afghan guerrillas. Local Afghan police and militia commanders told the *Times* there was no ambush, only an explosion, either of a land mine or a roadside bomb. After the blast, the US soldiers panicked, assumed they were being ambushed, and opened fire wildly.

Mary Tillman told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I'm disgusted by things that have happened with the Pentagon since my son's death. I don't trust them one bit." She said the military had burned Pat's uniform and gear as part of the cover-up of the circumstances of his death. Patrick Tillman, Pat's father, said, "The investigation is a lie. It's insulting to Pat."

Besides its general propaganda value as an example of supposed wartime heroism, the glorification of Pat Tillman's death served two additional purposes for the Bush administration. It linked Bush's wars to the celebrity of a popular athlete, and it gave a much distorted impression of the kind of people who are being wounded or killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. These victims are not celebrities and millionaires: they are for the most part working class youth, most of them joining the military from small towns and rural areas where there are few good-paying jobs or opportunities to go to college.

There is one additional aspect of Tillman's case. The incident demonstrates the enormous firepower that a small unit of American soldiers possesses, and the destructive impact of even the briefest military engagement. If this is what happens to an Army Ranger wearing body armor, one can only imagine the effects on an Iraqi family riding in a passenger car at a Baghdad checkpoint.

It is worth recalling the death of Pat Tillman the next time a Pentagon spokesman sanctimoniously declares that US soldiers take every effort to avoid civilian casualties or boasts of the precision with which the American military unleashes deadly force.



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