

Football star Pat Tillman's father: "They blew up their poster boy"

US Army deliberately withheld details of Ranger's "friendly-fire" death

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The parents of US Army Ranger and former professional football player Pat Tillman have reacted angrily to new revelations surrounding the circumstances of their son's death last year in Afghanistan.

The 27-year-old Tillman—who abandoned celebrity and a multimillion-dollar contract with the Arizona Cardinals after the 9/11 terror attacks to join up with the Rangers—died in a "friendly-fire" attack in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004. A May 4 article by the *Washington Post's* Josh White reported that soldiers on the scene knew that they had mistakenly shot and killed Tillman, along with an Afghan soldier working with the Rangers, in a bungled operation and immediately reported this to their superiors.

The military responded to Tillman's death with deception and cover-up. Authorities withheld information from family members in a cynical effort to promote the former football standout as a hero who died at the hand of the enemy in the "war on terror."

In a recent interview with the *Post*, Tillman's father, Patrick Sr., denounced the US military for its "botched homicide investigation" and for presenting "outright lies" to both the family and the public.

A new Army report obtained by the *Post*, consisting of nearly 2,000 pages of interview transcripts and investigative reports, reveals that within days of Tillman's death an Army investigator had determined he was killed by his fellow Rangers in an act of "gross negligence."

In the days leading up to a nationally televised memorial service for Tillman, top army officials, including theater commander Gen. John P. Abizaid, were informed that Tillman's death was unquestionably the result of fratricide. But they took the decision to withhold the facts from both the public and Tillman's family until weeks later.

The army's handling of Tillman's friendly-fire death is a textbook illustration of how the Bush administration and military authorities—with the complicity of the media—have utilized lies and misinformation to promote the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Details uncovered by the *Post's* investigation into the former football star's death reveal a

cynical and deliberate effort to exploit the tragedy for pro-war, propaganda purposes.

Patrick Tillman Sr., an attorney from San Jose, California, commented to the *Post*: "After it happened, all the people in positions of authority went out of their way to script this. They purposely interfered with the investigation, they covered it up. I think they thought they could control it, and they realized that their recruiting efforts were going to go to hell in a handbasket if the truth about his death got out. They blew up their poster boy."

The new Army report was prepared by Brig. Gen. Gary M. Jones in response to questions from the Tillman family and Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona. While the report's conclusion argues there was no official reluctance on the part of military authorities to tell the truth about the events of April 22, 2004, the overwhelming body of evidence in the report suggests precisely the opposite.

The events leading up to Tillman's death began when his unit, 2nd Platoon, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment—also known as the "Black Sheep"—was directed to split up after a Humvee's breakdown made it impossible for the 34 soldiers to proceed together. The unit was in the tenth day of a sweep near Khost in Afghanistan's Paktia province, near the Pakistan border, looking for Al Qaeda or Taliban fighters.

Over the objections of platoon commander Lt. David Uthlaut, a senior officer ordered half of the men to proceed on to the village of Manah, while the remainder stayed to await a local tow-truck driver for the Humvee before they could proceed.

Patrick Tillman was in the first group, which continued on through a canyon towards the village. The second half of the platoon, which included Tillman's brother Kevin, followed later. According to the *Post*, "When the second half of the platoon followed through the canyon, it reportedly came under enemy fire. Tillman grabbed another Ranger and the Afghan soldier and got into position to lend fire support. When the second half of the platoon rounded a corner, they mistook the trio as foes" and took aim at the three men.

Tillman reportedly detonated a signal grenade in a frantic

effort to stop the shooting, and cried out, “Cease fire! Friendlies!” The firing stopped temporarily, Tillman stood up, but was then gunned down by machine-gun fire. The young Ranger lying near Tillman saw a “river of blood” coming from his position; when the firing finally stopped for good he got up and saw that Tillman’s “head was gone.”

The immediate response of the authorities to the shooting was to cover up the facts. Kevin Tillman was flown back to the United States with his brother’s body, but was not informed about what had happened. Officers directed the soldiers involved not to talk about the events “to prevent rumors.”

A report sent out through Army channels on the day of the shooting said that Tillman had died in the medical treatment facility after his vehicle came under “direct and indirect fire.” His gunshot injuries were attributed to “enemy forces.” According to the *Post*, “An investigation was immediately launched, and several documents show that the chain of command was largely convinced that it was fratricide from the beginning.”

The following day, April 23, the army took the unusual step of burning both Tillman’s body armor and uniform, asserting they were a “biohazard.” The Jones report noted that this amounted to destruction of evidence.

Five days later, April 28, an initial Army investigation determined that friendly fire was the cause of Tillman’s death. Top commanders within the US Central Command, including Gen. Abizaid, were notified the following day.

But another four days later, at a nationally televised public memorial service in San Jose on May 3, military authorities were still concealing the truth. In a despicable effort to play on the emotions of both Pat Tillman’s family and the public, his death was depicted as a sacrifice made in the heat of battle. A Navy SEAL previously stationed with Tillman in Iraq said that Tillman had ordered members of his platoon “to seize the tactical high ground from the enemy... Pat sacrificed his life so that others could live.”

It was not until weeks later, over the Memorial Day weekend at the end of May 2004, that Tillman’s parents were finally informed of the real circumstances surrounding their son’s death. They have responded with legitimate bitterness.

“It just keeps slapping me in the face,” Mary Tillman, Pat’s mother, commented to the *Washington Post*. “To find that he was killed in this debacle—everything that could have gone wrong did—it’s so much harder to take. We should not have been subjected to all of this. This lie was to cover their image. I think there’s a lot more yet that we don’t even know, or they wouldn’t still be covering their tails.”

She added, “If this is what happens when someone high-profile dies, I can only imagine what happens with everyone else.”

The military-media manipulation the Pat Tillman story is reminiscent of the Jessica Lynch affair in the first days of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Encouraged by the military, the media

portrayed the young private from West Virginia as a war heroine who had fought off Iraqi ambushers, risking her life in the process. An unnamed military official told the *Washington Post* at the time, “She was fighting to the death.... She did not want to be taken alive.”

In fact, Lynch was captured after her unit came under fire following a wrong turn; her injuries were the result of her vehicle crashing. While the media peddled stories that she had been abused and raped by her Iraqi captors, in fact, the latter had rescued Lynch from the wreckage and took her to a hospital where doctors and nurses saved her life.

Two weeks later she was picked up by a military extraction team, who encountered no resistance. But the staged operation was filmed with night-vision cameras and then edited and released to the press, which broadcast the footage as proof of the daring rescue.

The US media latched on to the Pat Tillman story with equal enthusiasm. His death came at a time of growing opposition to the Iraq war, with 135 US soldiers killed in the month of April 2004 alone, and 800 wounded. American forces had just carried out the bloodbath in Fallujah, killing countless civilians and reducing the Iraqi city to ruins. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll at the time showed that 58 percent thought the war “was not worth the loss of American life” and half thought all US troops should be withdrawn from Iraq “as soon as possible.”

The promotion of Pat Tillman as a patriotic icon, the all-American war hero who had given up wealth and fame to fight for his country, served a propaganda function at the time. His story filled newspapers and magazines and tributes were performed at sporting events.

Beginning last December, with the publication of a two-part series in the *Post*, the mythology surrounding Tillman’s death began to unravel. Carrying interviews with soldiers on the scene at the time of his death, and providing information obtained from an internal Army investigation, the series exposed the army’s tale of his death as a fabrication.

This particularly filthy episode is a further indication of the dishonesty and fraud that pervades every aspect of US foreign policy and its worldwide crusade for “freedom and democracy.”



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