

Lies surround first death of an Australian soldier in Iraq

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The Howard government's dishonesty and arrogance has been epitomised by its treatment of Private Jacob Kovco, the first Australian soldier to be killed while serving in Iraq. After lying about the circumstances of Kovco's death, Australian authorities handed his corpse over to a private contractor in Kuwait, which then transported another man's body to Australia for burial.

The mantra of "support the troops" is continually flung in the face of opponents of the Iraq war to intimidate them into silence. But the government's attitude to Jacob Kovco and his family demonstrates the reality of its indifference and contempt towards the fate of the soldiers it has deployed in Iraq.

On April 21, Kovco was allegedly shot in the head by a single 9mm pistol bullet while he was resting inside his barracks in Baghdad. Two other soldiers in the same room allegedly did not see what happened. He died several hours later in a nearby US military hospital.

Kovco was 25-years-old. Like so many young people who enlist in the military, he was from a working class background. He grew up in the farming town of Briagolong in regional Victoria, where his first job was as a slaughterer in a local meat works. In May 2002, he enlisted in the Army. He was posted to the Sydney-based Third Battalion (3RAR) and had recently undertaken sniper training. In March this year, he was sent to Iraq to join the 110-man security force protecting the Australian embassy. He leaves behind a wife, two young children and a grieving family.

The obvious question raised in many minds was whether the young soldier had committed suicide. The illegal US-led invasion has turned Baghdad into a living hell of bombings, sectarian killings, curfews and checkpoints. On top of the general stress of being in Iraq and separated from his family, Kovco, as a sniper, would have experienced psychologically traumatic missions, such as long hours spent at embassy posts, regarding

every approaching car or person as a potential suicide bomber.

For the government, Kovco's death, combined with speculation about whether he had taken his own life, threatened to reignite public debate about the reasons for Australia's participation in the Iraq war and the ongoing occupation.

Those reasons were all based on outright lies. Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction or links to terrorism, and the occupation is not bringing democracy to the Iraqi people. The country is descending into civil war, while the US-led operation is aimed solely as plundering Iraq's energy resources and providing the American military with strategic bases in the centre of the Middle East. Australian troops are assisting in the policing of the Iraqi population as a *quid pro quo* for ongoing US support for Australian foreign policy, while the embassy officials Kovco was protecting are involved in sordid manoeuvres to gain lucrative contracts for Australian-based business. Defence Minister Brendan Nelson announced last month that Australian troops would be redeployed to more hazardous missions.

To suppress these issues, the government's instinctive response was to lie. Without a shred of evidence and before any investigation had been conducted, Nelson told Kovco's family and the media that he had accidentally shot himself while cleaning his weapon. Military officials hailed him as a committed soldier who loved what he was doing. The media joined in with jingoistic reports. Kovco, a private in an infantry battalion, was elevated by a *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist into "one of Australia's most highly trained and respected snipers".

By the time of the annual Anzac Day remembrance of Australia's war dead on April 25, Kovco was being eulogised by government and Labor opposition politicians alike as a hero who had made the ultimate sacrifice for his country.

For six days, the government was able to maintain this fictitious portrait of Kovco and the manner of his death. Its real attitude toward the young soldier was exposed, however, by the manner in which his remains were treated.

The Australian military has contracted the return of its casualties to the subsidiary of a US-based funeral firm, Kenyon International, which profits from the return of dead soldiers to their country of origin. Even as he was being lauded by Prime Minister John Howard, Kovco's body was being loaded onto an air force plane and flown to the Kuwaiti mortuary subcontracted by Kenyon to handle bodies.

While Kovco was identified when his coffin arrived in Kuwait, the military top brass was so indifferent as to what happened next, it appears it did not bother to arrange another identification check before the casket was loaded onto an Australian-bound plane on April 26. Incredibly, Kenyon sent the remains of a 47-year-old Bosnian instead, draped in an Australian flag and escorted by a member of Kovco's unit. The error was not noticed until a few hours before the aircraft was scheduled to arrive in Melbourne.

Upon being informed that the wrong body had been sent from Kuwait, the Howard government went into damage control. Nelson and senior military officials flew from Melbourne to an air force base in the town of Sale, where Kovco's parents and wife Shelley were waiting to be united with the coffin. Late on Wednesday night, Nelson personally informed them of the mistake. His outraged mother told the media that "all hell broke loose". Shelley Kovco demanded a phone call with Howard, during which she vented the fury of the family.

Amid a torrent of bewildered media commentary on the mix-up, and embarrassed *mea culpas* from the government, Nelson finally admitted on April 27 that he had lied about how Kovco died. "He wasn't in fact cleaning his weapon," Nelson told Macquarie Radio. "It was near him in his vicinity and he made some kind of movement which suggests that it discharged."

The new version of events has only provoked more questions and outraged the Kovco family even more. His distraught mother, Judy Kovco, told journalists: "He didn't shoot himself. The gun went off. It was near him? It was nearby? So what did Jake do? Put his head down near the table so it could shoot him in the head, did he?"

Suggesting the possibility that the government was trying to hide the fact that her son may have been killed in combat, she stated: "I want the truth and it's not coming

out and they will do one big cover-up because they want more boys to go over there and they don't want Australia's perfect record of no boys being killed in battle... It doesn't take a lot to work out what's going down here."

Kovco's stepbrother declared: "We've been kept in the dark and that is the most insulting thing. We can handle the truth and it shouldn't be kept from us. We need to have the truth in this."

The military had not arranged for an autopsy, indicating it did not intend conducting a serious inquiry into Kovco's death. New investigations are now underway, both into the circumstances of the shooting and into how the wrong body was sent to Australia. The state coroner in New South Wales (NSW) told the media yesterday that he would "assume jurisdiction". A new inquiry will be headed by the NSW police homicide squad and an autopsy will be performed on Monday.

The young soldier is scheduled to be buried next week with full military honours. Given what has transpired, no confidence can be placed in the investigations, while the official tributes and martial commemorations will smack of rank hypocrisy.

Kovco's funeral should become the occasion for serious consideration about why the government has lied about the young man's death. It should also provoke a review of the broader lies used to justify the US-led war, and the Australian government's support for it. The Australian soldiers serving in Iraq, like the rest of the population, have been duped by the Howard government. They are not defending democracy. They are helping to enforce the illegal conquest of a country. They should be withdrawn immediately and unconditionally and Howard and his cabinet should be tried for war crimes.



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