

Britain: Young soldier commits suicide over Iraq war

Julie Hyland

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Nineteen-year-old Jason Chelsea was buried on August 25. The young infantryman from Wigan, Lancashire killed himself on August 14, taking an overdose of painkillers and cutting his wrists. It was just days before he was to begin his first tour of duty in Iraq, as part of the King's Lancaster Regiment.

Jason had joined the British army aged just 16, proudly informing his parents that it would be his life's pursuit.

According to his family, the young man was terrified at what he would face in Iraq. His fear was not only the result of justified concern for his own life—some 115 British soldiers have been killed in Iraq—but that he might be forced to take morally repugnant actions against the civilian population.

In the days leading up to his suicide, Jason had told his parents that commanding officers had warned him he could be ordered to fire on children considered to be a threat.

The night of his death, he wrote a note to his parents explaining, "Really sorry, mum and dad. I'm just no good for you. I have got to finish it. I am just a waste."

Jason then swallowed 60 painkillers and slashed his wrists.

His mother, Kerry, said that as he lay dying he told her, "I can't go out there and shoot at young children. I just can't go to Iraq. I don't care what side they are on. I can't do it."

His father, Tony, has said, "My son was made very, very lonely by what was happening to him. He was very sad inside and he bottled up what was causing it. It was only after the overdose that he told us about his fears over what might happen in Iraq.

"In training, they were made to wrestle with dummies. Jason said they were also told they might have to fight kids and that they might have to shoot

them because they were carrying suicide bombs. He said the policy [where there was a suspected suicide bomber] was to shoot first and ask questions later."

His mother added: "Jason said that during the training for Iraq he had been told that children as young as two carry bombs and the time may come when he would have to shoot one to save himself and his friends. I think they need to think again about the training they give to young soldiers before Iraq."

The *Independent* newspaper reported that the Ministry of Defence has begun an investigation into the young man's death, and that whilst official guidelines for British troops offer no warning on child suicide bombers, "defence sources confirmed that the details of the advice given to soldiers are decided by each regiment."

Jason's suicide occurred exactly two years to the day of the funeral of another British soldier who had taken his life over the war in Iraq.

Peter Mahoney, a 45-year-old father of four, died of carbon monoxide poisoning after gassing himself in the family car on August 3, 2004. Mahoney, who was wearing his Territorial Army (TA) uniform when he died, was found by his wife, Donna.

Peter was an outspoken critic of the invasion of Iraq and was said to have been profoundly disillusioned by his experiences in the country where he was attached to the Royal Logistics Corps. Just before his death he had told his local newspaper in Carlisle that his view of the war as an act of aggression which Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush had sought to legitimise through lies was widely shared by other soldiers.

"The general consensus among the troops was that we were in Iraq so George Bush could seize control of the oilfields," he told the newspaper.

“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.”

His wife explained that Peter had left the TA as a result, but that “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.”

At least five British soldiers connected with Iraq have died in suspicious circumstances, although the army does not keep exact figures. The numbers of those deserting or going “absent without leave” has also risen.

The Blair government has placed many soldiers in an impossible situation. They are the frontline of an illegal occupation that is bitterly resented by many Iraqis. Identified as a hostile invasion force, they face violent and growing resistance. Bush and Blair have repeatedly insisted that foreign soldiers will not leave Iraq until the opposition is dealt with, i.e., that the resistance must be bloodily suppressed. It is in this context that the abuses at Abu Ghraib and in numerous other instances have occurred.

That British soldiers are expected to do whatever they are commanded, irrespective of its lawfulness, has been made plain by the new Armed Forces Bill of 2006. Under its provisions those refusing to take part in “military occupation of a foreign country or territory” can be sentenced to life imprisonment.

In April a court martial sentenced a British Royal Air Force doctor to eight months imprisonment for failing to comply with orders when he refused to cooperate in training and deployment for a third tour of Iraq.

Dr. Kendall-Smith said he had refused to serve in Basra because he believed that the invasion of Iraq was illegal and did not want to be complicit in an “act of aggression” contrary to international law. Ordering his imprisonment the judge stated, “Those who wear the Queen’s uniform cannot pick and choose which orders they will obey. Those who seek to do so must face the serious consequences.”

At the same time, the government is making increasing inroads into budgets for military equipment

in order to help fund its imperialist adventures abroad. A confidential financial expenditure document leaked last month emphasises the need for “high impact” cost-cutting measures that will cause “pain” and result “in severe impediment to the delivery of operational capability.”

According to the *Sunday Telegraph*, Land Command, which is responsible for ensuring equipment and training to British troops, has been ordered to cut more than £40 million from its budget in the next eight months.

The document was drawn up just as a board of inquiry into the Sergeant Steven Roberts, 2nd Royal Tank Regiment, found that he would have survived a bullet to his chest had he been protected by body armour.

The inquiry was the outcome of extensive campaigning by Roberts’s family. He was the first soldier to die in action in the 2003 war in Iraq. He died after handing over his body armour to another soldier because of an equipment shortage.

Earlier this month, Pauline Hickey, whose 30-year-old son Christian was killed by a roadside bomb in Basra in October 2005, said equipment shortages had also played a major role in her son’s death. Christian had even had to use his birthday money to buy his own army boots, she said. An all-party Defence Select Committee has admitted British troops in Iraq are “under-equipped” and overstretched.



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