

Australian soldier's death in Iraq covered-up

Private Jacob Kovco: the unanswered questions

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Like everything associated with the invasion of Iraq, the military board of inquiry into the death of Private Jacob Kovco has become a fiasco laced with lies and cover-up. On April 21, Kovco, aged just 25, became the first Australian soldier to die in Iraq after being shot through the head with his own 9mm Browning pistol while in his barracks at the Australian Embassy in Baghdad.

From the outset, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson lied about the circumstances of Kovco's death. At the same time, Australian consular officials handed his corpse over to a private contractor in Kuwait, which then transported the body of a Bosnian civilian contractor to Australia for burial. Immediately, it appeared that the government was hiding something.

Kovco had just come off shift from one of the most psychologically traumatising tasks performed by Australian troops in Iraq. He was an elite sniper, protecting the convoys of light armoured vehicles that transport Australian military, political, diplomatic and intelligence officials around the war-torn capital.

Only three possibilities existed: Kovco committed suicide, he accidentally shot himself or he was killed by a fellow soldier. Each was politically disastrous for the government, threatening to trigger new concerns about the inhuman conditions faced by the soldiers sent to enforce the US-led occupation of Iraq, and to rekindle widespread opposition to the war.

Five months later, after weeks of contradictory testimony at the inquiry, it is clear that the government and the military brass have worked systematically to prevent the truth ever being known. When the inquiry ended its hearings last week, and its officers retired to write their report, a litany of unanswered questions remained.

* Virtually all the crime scene evidence in Baghdad was quickly destroyed, either willfully or accidentally, by military officers. Kovco's room, which had been splattered with blood, was cleaned out, despite pleas from civilian police to preserve the evidence. Kovco's clothes were destroyed, while those worn by his roommates were washed. Military police performed no forensic tests.

* The laptop computer Kovco was using at the time of his death was turned off and closed before military or civilian police could see it. No information has been released on any message that he had sent or received.

* The bunkroom in which Kovco died was tiny—roughly the size of a shipping container—and cramped. Kovco and two other soldiers were no more than an arm's length apart, yet both his roommates said they saw nothing.

* A military police investigator, Sergeant Stephen Hession, did not inspect the room for five days. In the meantime, soldiers, including possible suspects, had been in and out.

* Kovco's pistol was placed in the lid of a box that once held copy paper. Later, another soldier's DNA was found on the pistol.

* Military authorities gave pre-prepared interview statements to key witnesses, including the two roommates, presenting fabricated accounts of what had happened. Another soldier was handed what he called a "bullshit scenario" whereby Kovco shot himself accidentally after bumping his funny bone. The statements also falsely declared that the soldiers were well drilled in a "buddy system" to check that loaded weapons were not carried off duty.

* Morticians at the Kuwait morgue—where Kovco's body was confused with that of Bosnian carpenter, Jusco Sinanovic, 47—washed his body, possibly with ammonia, before dispatching it to Australia. His hands, which might have held traces of gunpowder, had not been bagged, as is standard civilian police practice in a shooting death. When the body finally arrived in Australia eight days after his death, a pathologist assigned to perform the autopsy found that it had been stored in mothballs, eradicating traces of evidence remaining on his body.

* Australian Defence Force (ADF) chief Angus Houston flatly contradicted Defence Minister Nelson's claim, issued to the media the day after Kovco died, that the military had informed him that Kovco had accidentally shot himself while cleaning his weapon. Air Chief Marshal Houston said he had repeatedly advised Nelson that it was unclear how Kovco died. Nelson admitted six days later, on April 27, that his initial claim was false, and then offered a bizarre new version of events, in which the gun apparently went off by itself.

* A ballistics expert, Detective Inspector Wayne Hoffman, manager of the Forensic Ballistics Investigation Section of the New South Wales Police, presented the inquiry with a dozen detailed reasons why he believed Kovco died from a self-inflicted wound. Yet, inquiry president Group Captain Warren Cook took the extraordinary step, on the final day of hearings, of ruling out the possibility of suicide, well before the inquiry's report was written. "Suicide doesn't come into our reasoning whatsoever," he announced.

The *Bulletin*, a magazine which boasts of senior sources in the military and the Howard government, pointed out this week that a finding of suicide would have been distressing for Kovco's family, but even more disturbing for the government. Suicide, it noted, "is not altogether uncommon among soldiers in—or immediately after—high-stress combat deployments. But it is rarely acknowledged. And the suicide of an Australian soldier (with all its implications for troop morale) in a conflict as contentious as the Iraq War, would be much harder to explain than a death in combat. Only murder would make for a more difficult scenario."

The *Bulletin* predicted that the military board would attribute the death to misadventure or an "act of God".

Members of Kovco's family bitterly accused the government and the military of a cover-up. In a statement to the inquiry, Kovco's brother Ben said: "Though we would like to believe otherwise, it is very difficult to move beyond the undesirable idea that the ADF and its representatives have gone out of their way to destroy as much evidence as possible in an attempt to protect the organisation and its personnel from any implication of wrongdoing."

Kovco's mother Judy told Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "The 7.30 Report": "Enduring this inquiry, I just find this is face saving for them, for the army. This is not about my son's death." Asked whether she thought a major cover-up had taken place, she said: "I certainly do, yes, without doubt. They've done it in the past [been complicit in a cover-up]."

Kovco's widow Shelley told the inquiry that high-ranking defence officials and Defence Minister Nelson applied pressure so that her husband's body would be rushed home in time for a PR stunt on Anzac Day [an official military commemoration day]. This, she said, had contributed to the bungled repatriation of his body.

She revealed that the military had still not given her many of Kovco's belongings, including his laptop, on which he was writing an email to her just before he died. She also told the inquiry it would not find anything because the military had done such a thorough job of removing the evidence.

Just before the inquiry closed, the ADF announced that it had asked Internet web sites to remove revealing photographs and video of Australian soldiers assigned to the same security duties in Baghdad as Kovco. The images showed individual soldiers waving pistols around—some directly at the camera—and fanning wads of money while chomping on cigars. One picture showed a man in Australian uniform pointing a gun at the neck of a kneeling man, dressed as an Arab. The background was adorned with pornographic photographs, pasted on what appeared to be a soldier's barracks bedroom wall. Other videos reportedly showed soldiers exposing themselves.

The images gave just an inkling of the brutalised and de-humanised outlook instilled in Australian troops engaged in neo-colonial operations such as the occupation of Iraq.

Defence chief Houston condemned the display of "cultural insensitivity, disregard for operational security and inappropriate handling of weapons", and said an investigation would be launched to identify and punish the culprits. But Prime Minister John Howard urged people not to "overreact" to the images and declared that no special inquiry was needed. "I think we have to understand that soldiers, particularly in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, work in very stressful environments. Soldiers through the ages have let off a bit of steam when they are working in stressful environments."

Such conduct is, undoubtedly, the inevitable byproduct of the stress produced by continuously policing a hostile population—with every approaching person increasingly seen as a potential suicide bomber. But it is also the result of the military and ideological conditioning carried out to prepare young soldiers to kill innocent civilians. An unnamed senior Australian military officer told the *Bulletin* that US and allied snipers "are the psychological value-adders of modern urban warfare and they are becoming critical to combat operations in Iraq".

Members of the ADF "security detachment" in Baghdad are known to have opened fire on innocent civilians at least twice since 2004. In November that year, two men were shot driving a car, and army chief General Peter Cosgrove immediately defended the killings. In June this year, Australian soldiers blasted the bodyguards of Iraq's Trade Minister, Abdel Falah al-Sudany, killing one and wounding three others. Weeks later, Houston said an ADF inquiry had exonerated the soldiers. "Our personnel acted in accordance with their rules of engagement," he insisted.

No doubt these incidents, both briefly reported and then dropped, are only the tip of the iceberg. Since the illegal US-led invasion, Baghdad has descended into a nightmarish quagmire of shootings and bombings, with daily deaths of demoralised coalition troops and scores of innocent Iraqi civilians alike.

On May 2, Jacob Kovco was given a highly-publicised funeral with full military honours, attended by Howard, Nelson and Houston. His silver casket was draped in the Australian flag and flanked by a 100-strong guard of honour. The conscious cover-up of his death underscores the utter hypocrisy of the official commemoration of his life.



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