

Inquiry finds Australian soldier's death in Iraq an "accident"

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The Australian military's Board of Inquiry into the death of Private Jacob Kovco in Baghdad on April 21, 2006, just weeks after he arrived in Iraq, released its findings on December 1. Suicide and homicide were categorically ruled out. Kovco, the inquiry's three officers decided, accidentally shot himself in the head with his Browning 9mm pistol while "skylarking" with two other soldiers in their barracks.

The findings are a thoroughly predictable whitewash of the first death of an Australian soldier in the Iraq war. As soon as Kovco's death was reported to the military hierarchy and the Howard government, it was portrayed as a tragic accident. Before any investigation had even begun, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson told the media that Kovco had shot himself while cleaning his pistol.

Within days, Nelson changed the story to one in which Kovco triggered his weapon by "some kind of movement". The inquiry has spent five months to rule that the soldier put his loaded pistol to his head and pulled the trigger as a joke while listening to the Cranberries song, *Dreams*.

The inquiry found he was not depressed, drunk or on drugs, had no marital problems, was "ecstatic" about taking part in the occupation of Iraq, and, overall, was in "good health" and a "positive frame of mind". Evidence to the contrary was dismissed. Kovco had made entries in his journal referring to a bad dream in which he shot himself. Another entry detailed his horror at seeing badly wounded Iraqis being prevented from entering a hospital until they were given security clearances. These notes were described by the inquiry as "normal responses to difficult life experiences".

Conveniently, the military found that no-one else bears any responsibility whatsoever for the death of the 25-year-old soldier, ruling that it was caused by his

own carelessness. According to the report, he failed to handle his weapon with sufficient caution or unload it as stipulated by military regulations. While recommending that soldiers be given greater training, the inquiry asserted that Kovco's participation in a one-day course and a few practice shots on a range were more than adequate instruction in how to use a Browning pistol.

No-one in the military or political establishment was to blame either for Kovco's corpse being left in a Kuwait morgue while the coffin containing the body of 47-year-old Bosnian carpenter Jusco Simanovic was draped in a flag and flown to Australia on April 26 for burial with full military honours. All responsibility for this outcome was placed on the head of Kovco's sergeant, who was delegated to accompany the body home. The inquiry ruled that the sergeant, who had barely slept since Kovco's death and had been forced to look upon the badly disfigured face several times, failed to identify that Simanovic was not Kovco because he "was not in a fit and proper condition".

All in all, the Board of Inquiry report is an attempt to bury Jacob Kovco once and for all. Every question that has been raised over the strange circumstances surrounding his death has been rationalised away. Justifications were provided for the 96-hour delay before military police investigators arrived; the eight-day delay before key witnesses were even interviewed; the cleaning of the room where Kovco died; the washing of his body and the destruction of his clothes before forensic analysis; and the washing of the persons and clothing of the two soldiers in the room at the time before forensic analysis. According to the inquiry, none of these breaches of basic forensic procedures had any impact on the veracity of investigation.

Even more remarkably, the fact that military police

wrote the initial statements of key witnesses—upon which they based all subsequent testimony and which is the only evidence that Kovco was “skylarking”—was played down as “less than ideal”. The discovery of the DNA of another soldier on the magazine of Kovco’s pistol was likewise dismissed as irrelevant to the finding that Kovco shot himself by accident.

Kovco’s mother has rejected the inquiry’s verdict. Judy Kovco told the media: “I don’t trust the army. I don’t like their ethics... the whole damn thing is a cock-up from start to finish. You have to laugh at their findings.” On December 4, she issued a statement, declaring there “were grounds to ask for an independent review of that finding to find out exactly whether this decision is justified by the evidence”.

There is every reason to suspect a cover-up is taking place. Perhaps a reckless young man did put a gun to his head and pull the trigger to mock a song he didn’t like. He died in Iraq, however, a place he would never have been, if not for the Howard government’s support for the Bush administration’s criminal invasion.

The primary concern of Howard and the Australian military has never been discovering the truth about Private Kovco’s death. It has been to prevent any discussion over what the troops are doing in Baghdad in the first place and what impact the war is having on the Iraqi people and young Australian soldiers. From the moment a bullet entered Jacob Kovco’s head, the script has been that he did not commit suicide, he was not murdered and no other soldier accidentally killed him. Any of these scenarios would point to the tremendous levels of stress suffered by those involved in the Iraq war.

The inquiry deliberately downplayed the conditions in which Kovco was living. He was sharing a room the size of shipping container with two other men. Each day, he was performing guard duties at the Australian embassy, with his weapon ready to fire and on constant watch for potential suicide bombers or insurgents among the desperate Iraqis seeking to gain visas to Australia. He, like every other foreign soldier in the country, would have been acutely aware that the Iraqi people despised his presence and the US occupation that had turned the country into a living hell.

In the investigation and reportage of his death, Kovco’s concerns and fears about what he was seeing and doing in Iraq—as suggested by the now-revealed

journal entries—were ignored. The media transformed him into a gung-ho expert sniper who loved being in Baghdad and whom the Howard government could ceremonially bury as a “fallen hero”.

Everything that has transpired since Kovco’s untimely, unnecessary and tragic death on April 21 underscores that Howard, his ministers and his generals are conscious their foreign policy has little support among the Australian people. Even as they posture as loud and self-confident advocates of the Bush administration’s “war on terror”, they live in fear that the death of just one soldier—let alone larger numbers—may be all it takes to unleash a storm of anger over Australia’s involvement in the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.



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