

Britain: Failure to suppress video of “friendly fire” killing of British soldier by US pilots

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10 February 2007

The scandal surrounding the release of video evidence of a British serviceman’s death by “friendly fire” underscores that the lies and deceit surrounding the illegal invasion of Iraq continue.

An inquest has opened into the death of Lance Corporal Matty Hull, who was killed on March 28, 2003, when his convoy of light armoured vehicles near Basra was attacked by a US A-10 aircraft. Hull died of multiple injuries after his colleagues were unable to rescue him from his burning tank and their radio appeals for the planes to cease firing went unheeded. Four other soldiers were also wounded in the attack.

Hull’s widow, Susan, has described the inquest as her “one and only chance to hear how and why Matty died.”

Furore erupted, though, over video recordings made in the cockpits of the A-10s as they repeatedly attacked the convoy. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) initially denied the existence of these recordings.

The video evidence came to light only last week, when it was leaked to the *Sun* newspaper.

The video shows the pilots, reservists from the Idaho National Guard who had not been in action before, making a series of errors.

Some 12,000 feet up in the air, they saw the British convoy and tried to ascertain whether they were Iraqi vehicles. When a pilot told air controllers that he saw orange markings on the vehicles—signifying coalition troops—and asked whether there were friendly vehicles in the area, he gave vague coordinates and was told that “there are no friendlies this far north on the ground.”

One of the pilots is heard to say, “I want to get that first one before he gets into town.” The other replies, “Get him, get him.” The planes then attacked the convoy twice before receiving the message from base that their targets were British troops. “Abort your

mission. It looks like we have a blue-on-blue situation,” is the urgent warning, and then a British voice, “Abort, abort.”

Realising what they had done, one of the pilots says, “I’m going to be sick,” and then, “We’re in jail, dude.” Another is heard weeping, “I’m dead.”

Attention had initially focused on the role of the US authorities in suppressing details of the events leading to Hull’s death. But developments over the last week have made clear that the British authorities were fully complicit in this attempted cover-up.

At the time of the incident, Mrs. Hull said, the MoD told her that cockpit recordings of the attack did not exist. When the tapes finally became public knowledge after almost four years, the MoD claimed rather that they had simply not told Mrs. Hull about their existence. She described it as an “absolute disgrace” that this “vital evidence” should have taken so long to emerge.

In fact, the MoD knew about the existence of the videos immediately after the event. It now emerges that British military liaison officers participated in an investigation into the incident conducted in 2003 by the US Central Command. Arguing that the pilots “believed they were engaging enemy targets based on the best information they had at the time,” the investigation concluded that the two National Guardsmen were not culpable. The incident, they concluded, was accidental. No disciplinary action was taken.

The *Sun* reported that one of the pilots has subsequently been promoted to colonel with the Air National Guard’s A10 tankbuster training wing, teaching “novices how to dive and strafe targets.”

Faced with the killing and wounding of its own soldiers by its ally, the first response of the MoD was to

lie, denying the existence of the recordings even as it participated in exonerating the pilots involved behind closed doors. More was involved than one incident. At issue was the insistence of the US and Britain that their forces must not be held accountable for any of the crimes they committed, even if that meant enabling them to go scot-free when involved in incidences involving one another.

To this end, even when the MoD was unable to deny the existence of the recordings any longer, it attempted to restrict their use.

Matters came to a head last week when Assistant Deputy Coroner Andrew Walker angrily adjourned the inquest for a month, following the MoD's refusal to release the tape to the court. The MoD said that they did not have the authority for the video to be played in court. Their lawyer said that "high-level diplomacy between US and UK governments" was needed for this agreement.

The Pentagon had said that the video could be seen in court, but only by the coroner and the Hull family under MoD supervision. The press was not to be allowed to see the footage.

After the leak, though, the recordings were in the public domain. (Transcripts and the video itself are widely available online.) As such, the coroner argued that they should be seen in court and the Pentagon agreed. Susan Hull expressed satisfaction that the inquest would be able to use them.

American sources remain angry. A US embassy official in London said that the video had been leaked before the US military authorities had had a chance to make a decision on releasing it. A spokesman for US Central Command, Major David Small, said that as the US and UK shared so much classified information there was simply no need to declassify most of it. As the inquest was at such an early stage, "the process for declassifying the video was never given the opportunity to unfold," he said. One spokesman described it as "regrettable" that the video was now in the public domain.

The whole incident exposes a military structure that is completely unaccountable.

Once the videos were leaked, government figures sought to minimise the damage by appearing as the champions of openness. The announcement that the video would be released to the court was made through

Downing Street. Des Browne, the defence secretary, called the release "the right thing to do." Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett urged "as complete an inquest as possible."

When Conservative Party leader David Cameron went through the motions of asking Prime Minister Tony Blair if he was sure the MoD had not misled the family over the existence of the video, he replied, "I do believe the MoD did act in good faith throughout."

Susan Hull has indicated that she would have liked to hear the pilots give testimony in person to the inquest. However, her lawyer said, because of the immunity offered to US military personnel they could only be invited to give evidence. "They cannot be compelled to come," said Mrs. Hull.



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