

Pat Tillman's family speaks out against latest whitewash of "friendly fire" killing in Afghanistan

"Human beings continue to be sacrificed on the altar of a dual military occupation"

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29 March 2007

The family of Patrick Tillman, a victim of "friendly fire" in the war in Afghanistan, spoke out strongly against the US military's latest efforts to gloss over as "missteps" what they described as "criminal negligence, professional misconduct, battlefield incompetence, concealment and destruction of evidence, deliberate deception, and conspiracy to deceive" in his death.

In a statement to the press on March 26, the family of the slain football star and US Army Ranger condemned the findings released on Monday of an 18-month probe conducted by the Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General into Pat Tillman's April 2004 death. Characterizing the findings of the military's fifth investigation into the matter, the family said, "The truth is not what we received today. Once again, we are being used as props in a Pentagon public relations exercise."

"We remain convinced," they continued, "that the priority of the Pentagon was to prevent the public knowing that Pat was killed by the military's highest priority shock infantry unit, and that he was killed by a combination of shoddy leadership and clear violations of the Rules of Engagement, as well as violations of the Law of Land Warfare."

The family appealed to Congress to investigate Tillman's case, as well as the cases of other soldiers killed by fratricide in Iraq and Afghanistan. "These cases will further establish a pattern—now well-known by the American public—of spin and deception by the Pentagon and the administration it serves," Tillman's family argued.

Patrick Tillman, a star athlete for the Arizona Cardinals with a multimillion-dollar contract, left his lucrative position on the team to join the military in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. He was killed in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004.

On May 3 of that year, at a nationally televised public

memorial service in San Jose, Tillman's final minutes were described as a heroic standoff with Taliban insurgents. A Navy SEAL that had previously served with Tillman in Iraq reported that Tillman had ordered members of his platoon "to seize the tactical high ground from the enemy ... Pat sacrificed his life so that others could live."

Tillman was even posthumously awarded the Silver Star, the second highest US military decoration for valor, and promoted to corporal. The Pentagon statement accompanying the award declared, "He ordered his team to dismount and then maneuvered the Rangers up a hill near the enemy's location ... As they crested the hill, Tillman directed his team into firing positions and personally provided suppressive fire ... Tillman's voice was heard issuing commands to take the fight to the enemy forces."

Following his death, the military seized every opportunity to promote Tillman as an all-American hero in the "war on terror," someone who had everything and gave it all up to valiantly fight and die for his country. Patriotic observances were made at sporting events, and the official story of his death was endlessly repeated and embellished in the media. President Bush called Tillman "an inspiration on and off the football field."

However, after numerous probes, investigations, and interviews with eyewitnesses, it became clear that the official military account of Tillman's death was pure fiction. Tillman was killed by friendly fire in a bungled operation with numerous features the military found too embarrassing to be made public.

On April 22, 2004, Tillman's 34-man platoon—2nd Platoon, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment—was ordered to split up after one Humvee out of nine carrying the platoon broke down on the tenth day of a

sweep operation near Khost in the Paktia province of Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border.

Half the platoon was instructed to proceed to the village of Manah, while the remainder stayed behind with the inoperative Humvee to wait for a local tow truck. The platoon commander, Lt. David Uthlaut, objected to the order to split up his platoon, but was ignored. The *Washington Post* in December 2005 suggested that Manah had no military significance, but that the top brass in the operation wanted to record the village as an achieved objective sooner rather than later.

Uthlaut went with half of the platoon towards Manah through a canyon, and left Sgt. Greg Baker in charge of the second half, which waited for a tow truck to pick up the disabled vehicle. Patrick Tillman went with Uthlaut, while his brother, Kevin Tillman, who was serving in the same unit, stayed with Baker's group. Uthlaut also left a .50-caliber machine gun, the platoon's heaviest weapon, behind with Baker's group, which would be more vulnerable to attack.

Uthlaut's group made it out of the canyon without incident, but the high walls of the canyon rendered radio contact between the two groups impossible. After the tow truck arrived, Baker's group followed.

Before it could leave the canyon, however, Baker's group was ambushed. According to the military version of events, insurgents attacked with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades as well as land mines or improvised bombs. The *Los Angeles Times*, however, reported in December of 2004 that there were no insurgents present; Baker's group simply panicked after hitting land mines. Whatever the case, Baker's group raced to extricate itself from the canyon.

When Uthlaut heard the explosions, he ordered his men to turn around and rushed back into the canyon to rescue the rest of the platoon. Patrick Tillman, knowing his brother was in Baker's group, got out of his Humvee and led a three-man fire team on foot up a ridge in an attempt to flank any attackers. However, as he and two other soldiers, including one native Afghani with a full beard, came into view of the embattled Rangers in Baker's group, they were mistaken for insurgents.

At 100 meters, soldiers from Baker's group opened fire with the .50-caliber machine gun, killing the Afghani soldier instantly. Patrick Tillman and the other soldier dove flat on the ground. Tillman tried to identify himself, shouting "Cease fire! Friendlies!" over the shooting and throwing a signal grenade. The firing stopped momentarily, and believing that he had been recognized, Tillman stood up, waving his arms. He was immediately gunned down.

Uthlaut's soldiers ultimately identified themselves by firing flares continuously into the air and by throwing smoke

grenades. The only surviving soldier of Tillman's fire team described a "river of blood" coming from Tillman's body; his "head was gone." Uthlaut himself, as well as his radio operator, were wounded in the fighting.

The military could not allow this version of events to reach the American public, even though more than a dozen soldiers involved in the fighting, Tillman's immediate superiors, and high-ranking officers at a command post nearby knew within hours that his death was accidental.

One of the more unpleasant facts among many concerning the incident is that the Rangers apparently did not hesitate to turn a .50-caliber machine gun on a man waving his hands in the air when they believed he was an insurgent. An Army report sent out the day of his death said that Tillman had died in the medical treatment facility after his vehicle came under "direct and indirect fire" from insurgents.

What remained of Tillman's clothes and equipment was burned as "biohazard," soldiers were instructed not to talk about the incident, and Kevin Tillman was not told until after the operation was over that his brother had been killed. Kevin Tillman was subsequently flown back to the States with his brother's body, but was still not given an explanation of his death.

Following the latest investigation, a number of military personnel have been cited for certain errors and "missteps," and the documents surrounding the Silver Star award have been found to exhibit "deficiencies." Tillman's family has rejected these results, calling them an "attempt to impose closure by slapping the wrists of a few officers and enlisted men" and "another bureaucratic entrenchment."

"Human beings continue to be sacrificed on the altar of a dual military occupation," the family declared. "Thousands of Americans and Afghans, hundreds of US allies, and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis' lives have been lost and shattered. We say these things with disappointment and sadness for our country."



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