

The Tillman Story: An exposure of military mythmaking in the service of the US “war on terror”

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1 September 2010

More than six years have passed since the death of Pat Tillman, the professional athlete who gave up a multimillion-dollar football contract with the Arizona Cardinals to enlist in the military after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Tillman was killed by “friendly fire” in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004. The Bush administration and the military brass immediately falsified the accidental death, creating a myth of a heroic battle in order to promote the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the American population. The cover-up fell apart, primarily through the determined efforts of Tillman’s family.

A new documentary film, written and directed by Amir Bar-Lev and narrated by actor Josh Brolin, tells this story and brings it up to date. *The Tillman Story* adds some important material and will bring this important episode to a wider audience. With the use of documentary footage, including media coverage in the aftermath of his death and excerpts of the 2007 Congressional hearings on the incident, a filmed return to the remote corner of Afghanistan where he died, as well as extensive interviews with Pat Tillman’s family and several of the soldiers in his unit, the film unearths the facts.

The testimony of the Tillman family—his mother Mary Tillman, brother Richard, father Pat Tillman, Sr. and wife Marie—is especially powerful. Although all of the official investigations of the incident whitewashed the cover-up, Tillman’s family and fellow soldiers tell the truth, explaining what they learned from the bitter experience of his death and the lies that followed. Pat’s brother Kevin, who does not appear in the film, has elsewhere issued the most scathing and eloquent denunciations of the role of the military and the entire Bush Administration. (See Pat Tillman’s brother denounces the US military’s “deliberate and calculated lies”, 26 April 2007)

Pat and his younger brothers Kevin and Richard were brought up in Northern California. In May 2002, some eight months after the September 11 attacks, Pat and Kevin enlisted in the military. They undoubtedly accepted, at least in part, the argument that the war in Afghanistan, which had been launched by the Bush Administration within weeks of the 2001 attacks, was a necessary act of self-defense.

As Mary Tillman relates in the film, she made no secret of her antiwar views. She was unhappy when her sons enlisted, and “made it known.” At the same time, she indicates that Pat was searching for a

sense of purpose, and that he gave up his lucrative football contract because he did not see himself as separate from or superior to those who were being sent to Afghanistan and Iraq. “The military was not what he expected...he did not like what he saw,” she explains.

Tillman was a young man who thought for himself. His enlistment was heavily publicized at the time as a means of whipping up patriotic support for the Bush administration and its well-advanced plans to invade Iraq. Tillman, however, refused to grant any interviews despite many media requests. Pat was an atheist, a young man who read Emerson and Noam Chomsky. He earned the respect of many soldiers of different backgrounds and views, as they explain in the movie.

Russell Baer says he “expected Pat to be a jock,” without any particular interest in issues other than football, but soon found out that he was thoughtful, well-read and always ready to listen and exchange views. “He wanted to find out what you are about,” says one of the soldiers. Bryan O’Neal explains that Pat never used his football celebrity to treat anyone else with anything less than complete respect.

Tillman was given the opportunity to return to professional football after a first tour of duty in Iraq, his brother Richard explains, but he refused. He and Kevin had signed up for three years, and, although by now he was strongly opposed to the war, he was unwilling to take advantage of his position in a way that was not possible for his fellow soldiers. In April 2004 Tillman was sent to Afghanistan.

Tillman was killed on April 22, 2004. His 34-man unit had been divided in half in a remote area in Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan after the breakdown of one of their vehicles. Tillman was killed by some of his fellow soldiers in a case of mistaken identity and what one army veteran interviewed in the film calls a “lust to fight.”

The cover-up began immediately after Tillman’s death, as the film demonstrates through interviews with some of the soldiers in his unit. Russell Baer was instructed to accompany Kevin Tillman and Pat’s remains on a plane back to the US immediately after Pat’s death, and was warned “to keep quiet.” Kevin, who had been separated from his brother when the unit was divided up before the shooting began, was kept in the dark. As Baer explains, “I barely said two words to him” on the long plane journey, “afraid that he might ask me” what had happened. Bryan O’Neal also expresses his anger and anguish over the way his superiors ordered him to remain silent.

The Pentagon knew that the truth about Tillman's death would undermine support for the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The "friendly fire" incident took place shortly before the notorious Abu Ghraib photographs were released to the world.

The military therefore fabricated a story and posthumously awarded Tillman a Silver Star. The lies about Tillman's death were made official at a public memorial ceremony, held on May 3, 2004 in San Jose, California and addressed by Senator John McCain, as shown in the documentary.

It was not until five weeks after Tillman's death that General Philip Kensinger was given the job of telling a press conference that the true cause of Tillman's death was "probably" friendly fire.

The Bush Administration, having originally sought to use Tillman's enlistment, gambled that the family, even if they knew or suspected the truth, would be so shattered by Pat's death that they would either accept the original official story, or at any rate be satisfied with the belated admission that the death was an accident.

As the film shows, this was a grave miscalculation that underestimated the courage and determination of the family, and especially of Mary Tillman. The film follows the family as it embarks on what was to become a years-long campaign to expose not only the specific circumstances of Pat's death but, even more importantly, the real reasons for the cover-up.

First, as Pat Tillman Sr. explains in the film, the family was given 3,000 pages of heavily redacted Army records on the case, in the hope that this would have the effect of "drowning" their investigative efforts. The inclusion of every interview, of radio communication logs and territorial maps, with nearly every name blacked out, made the reconstruction of the incident extremely difficult. The family was reduced to counting the number of blacked out spaces in order to try to identify those involved.

While Mary Tillman led the struggle, her former husband was fully supportive of the family's campaign. Pat Sr., a lawyer, sent an enraged letter to the authorities in 2005, a letter that triggered a Congressional hearing into the incident.

The film's depiction of the Congressional hearings in 2007 is significant. The Republicans were largely absent. Presiding was California Democratic Congressman Henry Waxman. The Democrats posed a few uncomfortable questions to, among others, top Generals Richard Myers and John Abizaid, and to Donald Rumsfeld, who had by then retired as Pentagon chief in the Bush cabinet. The generals and Rumsfeld said "I don't recall" or words to that effect some 82 times in response to questions about when they found out that Tillman had been the victim of friendly fire and had not died in combat, as the Pentagon had falsely maintained.

The main purpose of this hearing, however, was damage control. The Democrats provided it as a safety valve in response to the determined campaign waged by the Tillman family, but nothing was exposed. General Kensinger became the highest-ranking officer censured in the affair, precisely because he was by then retired.

Kensinger, who is interviewed in the film and expresses some bitterness over his treatment, was assigned to take the fall, while all of the higher ups completely escaped punishment.

It is revealing that General Stanley McChrystal, although he knew the true circumstances of Tillman's death within a day and nevertheless signed the order six days later awarding him a Silver Star, with its false reference to "devastating enemy fire," did not even receive a slap on the wrist. Indeed, McChrystal was appointed, two years after this Congressional hearing and after Barack Obama had replaced George Bush in the White House, to head all US forces in Afghanistan. McChrystal's removal earlier this year had nothing to do with his performance in the cover-up of Tillman's death.

Filmmaker Bar-Lev, in an online interview, characterized the 2007 Congressional hearing as follows: "...there's been no culpability on the second half of this tragedy, which is the higher ups trying to cover it up...to borrow a football metaphor, they [the Tillman family] ran the ball 99 yards over four years' time, they handed it off at the one-yard line to Congress and they fumbled it..."

Of course, as one blogger pointed out quite accurately, the Democrats didn't fumble anything, "they threw the game." Mary Tillman and other family members explain their disgust with the gentle treatment accorded to Myers, Abizaid and Rumsfeld at the 2007 hearing.

McChrystal's role, which is not mentioned in the film, in fact reflects the complete continuity between the policies of the Bush and Obama Administrations. This important lesson of the whole Tillman story is downplayed in the movie.

The Tillman Story, while it clearly indicates the causes of the Tillman cover-up in the wars themselves and the efforts to sell these criminal enterprises to the American people, stops short of drawing the crucial political lessons.

The movie nevertheless has something important to say and deserves to reach a wide audience. It does not claim to be "neutral" on the issues of the war, unlike many recent films, such as *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker*, with their cowardly attempts to divorce these imperialist adventures from the politics behind them.

Above all what distinguishes this documentary is the presence of the Tillman family. It would not take no for an answer, would not take the easy road of accepting a false and lying martyrdom for their son. This family, including Pat Tillman, of course, is the true protagonist in this story. Its proud and principled struggle, reflecting something very important about the democratic traditions of the American people and of the working class in particular, strikes a hopeful note. There are millions of families like this one, and they will be heard from in the days and years to come.



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