

GI SPECIAL 6J20:



U.S. Army soldier in Arab Jabour, south of Baghdad, Feb. 4, 2008. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

Notice:

Because of the length of the first report, this issue contains only two. The second report is a photo collection from the huge demonstration against the Occupation on the streets of Baghdad October 18. T

**“It Is Fucking Plain As
Day”**

**“The Tank Shot At The Building
I Was In And Killed Two Of My
Friends,” The Soldier Said:**

“And Then We Were All Asked To Lie About It”

The Army Says No, But A Video And Eyewitness Testimony Indicate A U.S. Tank Killed Two U.S. Soldiers: The Mother Of One Demands Answers

[Thanks to Garrett Reppenhagen, Iraq Veterans Against The War, who sent this in.]
[Excerpts]

In a second e-mail, MacFarland said that “the supporting evidence” behind the Army’s investigation further proved that a tank did not kill Nelson and Suarez -- but that evidence could not be produced because it was classified. He did not consent to an interview.

Oct. 14, 2008 By Mark Benjamin, Salon Media Group, Inc.

Once a cop, always a cop. Asked if she wanted to see a graphic battle video showing her son Albert bleeding to death, Jean Feggins, retired from the Philadelphia Police Department, said yes.

“Listen, I’ve moved dead bodies of people I don’t even know,” she told me, as she sat on a brown couch in the den of her West Philadelphia row house. “I need to know everything. Because he is not a stranger. That’s my baby. That’s my child.”

When Pfc. Albert Nelson died in Iraq in 2006, the Army first told Feggins that he might have been killed by friendly fire, and then that it was enemy mortars.

She says she never believed the Army’s explanation. “I always felt like they were lying to me,” she said. “I could never prove it.”

“I would ask the casualty officer what was going on. I’d be told they are still working on the report,” she said. “They were still doing their investigation. What could I do? It’s the U.S. military. I had no control.”

She did not know that there was a video of his death until I contacted her recently. Salon has obtained evidence -- including a graphic, 52-and-a-half minute video -- suggesting that friendly fire from an American tank killed two U.S. soldiers in Ramadi, Iraq, in late 2006, and that the Army ignored the video and other persuasive data in order to rule that the deaths were due to enemy action.

Feggins watched the video with me in her den.

Shot from the perspective of the soldiers taking fire from what they clearly believe is an American tank, the footage shows how Pfc. Albert Nelson and Pfc. Roger Suarez-Gonzalez died.

It also records soldiers trying to save Nelson's life, and the sound of a platoon sergeant attempting to report over a radio that the casualties were due to friendly fire. He then seems to be overruled by a superior officer who insists it was an enemy mortar attack.

Troops from Nelson's unit interviewed by Salon, including three soldiers there that day, blamed friendly fire from a U.S. tank for the deaths. "A tank shot us," said a soldier. "That is what happened."

An Army investigation, however, found the deaths were caused by enemy fire.

Soldiers from Nelson and Suarez's platoon, based at Fort Carson, Colo., described what they felt was pressure from above to accept this official story despite evidence to the contrary -- including the video, which has circulated widely.

Jean Feggins, after watching the video, said it was more evidence that the Army had misled her about the circumstances of her son's death.

The Army told Feggins that her son had died instantly, while the video shows a painfully protracted attempt to get Nelson to a field hospital before he bled to death.

In a statement to Salon, Army spokesman Paul Boyce reiterated the Army's conclusion that Nelson and Suarez were killed by enemy action. But the incident at Ramadi in December 2006 raises questions about how the U.S. military investigates alleged friendly fire incidents -- for which there are no reliable statistics -- and how it communicates its findings to the loved ones of the deceased.

Jean Feggins wants nothing less than the whole truth about what killed her son. "I'm not going to have any closure until I know exactly what happened to him," she said. "I don't care how gruesome it is.

"Tell me the truth. I can handle it."

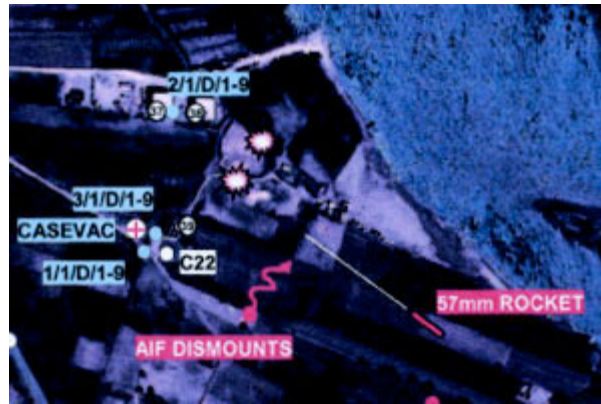
Combat:

The only reason there is a video of what happened in Ramadi is because Sgt. 1st Class Jack Robison, who was there that day, wanted to record a firefight. The video, which is all from the point of view of Robison's helmet camera, begins immediately before the shell's impact. It records the explosion, the effort to help the wounded -- in bloody detail -- and long patches of conversation in which the soldiers present describe how they were shot by an American tank.

As of Dec. 4, 2006, many of the U.S. Army soldiers fighting alongside Albert Nelson and Roger Suarez were well into 15-month tours of duty in Iraq. The troops were moving house to house through Ramadi, a city of half a million that hugs the shore of the Euphrates River 70 miles west of Baghdad, battling Sunni insurgents, taking casualties, delivering many score more. The men of 2nd Platoon, D Company, 1st Battalion, 9th

Infantry, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division were fighting in one of the bloodiest areas of Iraq during one of the bloodiest stints of the war.

On the 4th, the fighting was so fierce that some of the Americans had dropped grenades off roofs right onto the heads of insurgents, and fired their machine guns till the barrels almost melted. As one of the men said recently, "I probably killed eight guys at least."



U.S. Army battle plan for December 4, 2006.

Second Platoon was encamped in a battered white two-story ferro-concrete building, with a gray-dirt courtyard and an attached cinder-block latrine building, not far from the south bank of the Euphrates. On the night of Dec. 3, they had slept at their weapons posts on the speckled marble floors.

On the roof of "building #2," as it was known in U.S. Army battle plans for the day, stood Nelson, Suarez, seven other U.S. soldiers and an unknown number of Iraqi army troops. Nelson, Suarez and a soldier named Hobson had taken up a position on the northwest corner of the roof, while the other Iraqi and American soldiers had taken up positions a little further south along the western wall of the roof.

Below and just in front of them, at ground level on the west side of the building, was the courtyard. Another group of soldiers, including the platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Jack Robison, was holed up next to the little cinder-block latrine building that hugged building #2 in the courtyard's southeast corner.

Five hundred yards to the west was another cluster of Americans, 1st Platoon, broken into three squads, along with several tanks. Sandwiched between 2nd Platoon's position in building #2 and 1st Platoon's position to the west was a pocket of Iraqi insurgents. Due north of building #2, across the Euphrates on the north bank, was another clutch of Iraqis, firing mortars at the Americans.

From the northwest corner of the roof, Nelson and Suarez were shooting at the insurgents to the west, Nelson with his SAW (squad automatic weapon, a light machine gun), Suarez with an M240 machine gun. Hobson was standing slightly behind them and facing north, firing at the Iraqi mortar team across the river.

Albert Nelson, from West Philadelphia, was the class clown, a popular big brother figure to the other soldiers. At 31, he was years older than the other privates.

If Nelson was the guy telling the jokes, 22-year-old Roger Suarez was the guy who didn't always get them, because his English wasn't that good. A native of Nicaragua who had lived in Florida before enlisting, he struggled to pick up on the frat boy humor the other soldiers shared.

On the ground-floor level, in the courtyard just outside the latrine building, the man in charge of 2nd Platoon, Sgt. Robison, a 35-year-old from Oklahoma, put on a helmet camera.

"Sergeant Rob," as the troops called him, had just arrived in Iraq and had never been in a battle before, and wanted to record the day's action. After he strapped the camera on his helmet, he expressed regret. "I probably missed all that cool footage," said Rob. "Of us fucking just nailing that fucking house," said another soldier, finishing his sentence.

A soldier beckoned Rob. He led Rob from the courtyard and into the latrine building and over to a dirty, translucent window on the south end of the structure. "Check that fucking shit," he told Rob. "See the tank?"

"No. Where?" asked Rob. "Right up the street that way," said the soldier, pointing west. "Stand up right here."

But Rob still couldn't see the tank clearly, so a soldier knocked the panes from the window. "There's a huge tank right there."

They craned their necks for a glimpse of the tank, which was nearly due west and situated at an extreme angle from the latrine building. Now Rob saw it. "Oh yeah. Fucking that shit up, huh?" The tank was one of several from 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, part of the 1st Armored Division and attached to the infantry that day.

At that moment, the tanks to the west started pounding a nearby structure where insurgents were holed up. Some of the soldiers in building #2 had a clear view as one of the tanks fired a 120 shell into the position. A cheer went up.

Then some of the soldiers in building #2 noticed something ominous. A tank's turret had turned their way. The Americans and Iraqis watched the muzzle flash. Almost instantly, the house shook from the impact of an explosion.

Sergeant Rob and the other soldiers in the latrine building were thrown to the ground. The troops began shouting. "Everyone all right?" "Jesus fucking Christ!" "What the fuck was that?" Rob, who had also seen the muzzle flash, answered, "Dude, that was the tank." "Is he shooting at us?" asked a soldier. "I think so," said Rob.

Everyone in the latrine building was safe and sound. The roof of building #2, however, had taken a direct hit on the northwest corner, right where Suarez, Nelson and Hobson had been stationed, the shell spraying debris through the crowd.

After the shell hit, those men on the roof who could still walk bounded toward the staircase at the northeast corner, shoving each other forward and down the stairs, at least one fleeing so quickly that he committed the cardinal sin of leaving his gun behind. The men regrouped on the second floor. Meanwhile the tank's M240 coaxial machine

gun, mounted next to the turret, began firing into building #2. Instinctively, one of the soldiers who had fled to the second floor started firing back at the tank.

Rob began directing the effort to get the shooting to stop. "Make sure that tank knows where we're at!" he yelled into the radio, trying to reach the lieutenant in charge of the platoon, one of the refugees from the roof who was now on the second floor. "I think the tank fired at us."

"Yeah, it just took out the fucking roof," marveled a soldier. "Who did?" demanded another. "That tank," replied the soldier. "I saw him fucking hit it."

"Somebody call that tank," Rob yelled. "Make sure it knows where we're at."

The troops began to shout "Cease fire! Cease fire!" at the soldier on the second floor who was shooting at the tank.

Sergeant Rob ordered a soldier in the latrine building to attract the attention of the tank by firing a white star cluster, a flare that is used to notify U.S. troops that they are firing on their own men. The soldier crept along the floor as the bullets kept coming, and handed the flare to another man, who shot it out the door. Within seconds, the firing had stopped.

"Dude," said Rob, "I'm almost positive that was that tank, because I saw him flash." The soldier pointed out the door. "Did you see the roof?"

"I know, I see it."

Then Rob and the others heard the shouting from above. "We got men hurt, upstairs!"

After a quick head count on the second floor, the men had realized that several soldiers were missing. Sgt. Jacobson sped back up the stairs and saw Nelson unconscious, blood pouring from the stump of his left leg. The shell had taken it off above the knee.

Robison bounded out into the courtyard and into building #2. He waited as a wounded Iraqi was brought down the stairs, and then ran up the staircase to the top floor. When he arrived, Nelson had already been dragged down from the roof. He lay on the floor in his desert fatigue pants, with his shirt unbuttoned and open.

A medic was tying a tourniquet to what remained of the unconscious soldier's leg. Nelson was also bleeding from the head.

"Who else is up, who else is hurt?" demanded Rob. "Nobody's up there," answered a soldier. "Hobson's fucked up!" answered another.

"Tourniquet's on," proclaimed one of the soldiers working over Nelson, and then a U.S. jet screamed overhead. Everybody hit the deck, anticipating the possibility of more friendly fire, this time from the air.

Rob and the others began the task of evacuating Nelson, using the radio to call for medical evacuation, while other troops tried to encourage the wounded man, who was now moaning in pain.

“Stay with me, Nelson!”

“Don't you die on me, Nelson!” “Don't die, buddy!”

Nelson's friends were demanding a chopper, a “bird,” but the lieutenant on scene called for a medical evacuation APC, “Dog 5,” which was positioned not far from the tank that had fired the shell, to pick up his wounded.

He sent a soldier to look for Nelson's missing leg.

Hobson had taken a chunk of the building to the face, as had one of the Iraqis. Hobson had also been sprayed with the blood and body parts of someone else. “Cool scars, cool scars,” said Rob, trying to comfort Hobson.

The impact of the explosion had dislocated the arm of another soldier named Meeker who had been standing just south of Nelson. The medic popped it back in. It was only after Nelson had been carried downstairs on a litter, moaning, “Oh God,” and babbling from loss of blood, that anyone noticed Suarez was missing.

“I can't find Suarez,” said one of the troopers. “Where was he?” asked Rob. “He was up on the roof,” answered the soldier.

Rob began to search the compound and count his men. Three minutes into the search, a soldier gave him the news. “Sergeant Rob, I found Suarez.”

“Out back?” guessed Rob.

“He's ... gone,” confirmed the soldier. He'd found what remained of Suarez in the back yard. Suarez had taken a direct hit.

The tank round had destroyed everything except his head and torso, which had been blown off the roof into the yard to the east of the building.

“Fuck. All right. All right,” muttered Rob, and then, all business, returned to the task of getting medical attention for his wounded. “Where's the one one three?” he asked, using a military term for the APC that was supposed to evacuate the wounded.

Rob was informed that the medevac unit, Dog 5, had been and gone. Apparently misunderstanding a report that Suarez was dead to mean there were no more casualties to evacuate, the APC had driven away empty.

After threatening to hijack an Iraqi humvee, Rob was able to get Nelson and Hobson into the American vehicle, which had finally returned, and on their way to medical attention.

Nearly a half-hour after the incident, he was still trying to collect and feed the proper information to headquarters via radio, and get them to understand just who had been hurt and who had died. His men, milling around in the darkness of the building's ground floor, were still comparing notes and grousing about the friendly fire.

"Them tankers got an ass whooping coming from hell," said one. "I swear to fucking God I'm beating some ass. That was uncalled for."

"Hey. Live in the now," cautioned Rob, taking a break from radio chatter. "Where it's good."

"Meeker said he saw when the bitch came in on him," protested a soldier. "He saw the bitch come in on him."

"I saw it too," agreed Rob.

"I'm just pissed," said the soldier. "I know," said Rob.

"The reason why I was pissed is because he saw that round, from the tank. That was not an Iraqi."

"I saw it too," repeated Rob. "It was a tank."

"And I was right next to him," said a soldier who'd been on the roof.

"It was a tank, it was a tank," repeated Rob, agreeing with his angry men, trying to get them to calm down.

"We know it was a tank. They got an ass whooping coming. That's all I got to say."

Rob decided to deliver the message to higher-ups. "I want it understood," he said into the radio to Dog-6, the handle used by the company commander, Capt. James Enos. "That was one of our tanks."

As Rob listened to what his superiors were telling him, the men on the ground floor started to catch the drift.

Rob said, "Good, copy," but before he could say anything to the soldiers around him, one of them had blurted, "That's bullshit!"

"You're going to have to walk with me," said Rob.

"That's fucking bullshit," insisted the soldier.

The Army was telling Rob that the men on the roof, Hobson, Meeker, Nelson, Suarez and the Iraqis, had been hit by enemy fire, not a tank round.

"It is a tank," insisted a soldier who'd been on the roof. "I was up there. I know."

"OK," said Rob. "Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter. None of it matters. OK? Doesn't matter.

"Yeah, it matters," protested another soldier.

"Doesn't matter," insisted Rob.

"It matters to me," said the soldier.

“They're saying we got hit with a 120,” said another soldier, telling the men in the room what the official story would be.

Rob addressed the men, confirming their suspicions. “It was a 120 mortar, OK? Got it? You fucking got it? It was a 120 mortar.”

“Don't even worry about it, OK? Until we hear different it was a 120- millimeter mortar. I don't think it was. But for now, that's the way it is, and that's what happened, got it?”

About 50 minutes after the explosion on the roof, one of Sergeant Rob's men told him, “Your camera's still on.” Startled, Robison responded, “Yeah. Turn that bitch off.”

By that time, Nelson was dead.

He had lost too much blood during the confused and protracted effort to evacuate him.

He died inside the medevac vehicle at the gates of the military hospital.

Within hours of the chaos at building #2, Capt. Enos “suspected a friendly fire incident,” as an Army report would later put it. He visited building #2, and saw the remnants of a tank round in the structure.

And he viewed the footage from Robison's camera.

The video does not show the tank firing, or the shell hitting the building. It does record the sound of the shell's impact and show the latrine building shaking, and it documents the subsequent machine-gun fire, the soldiers yelling, “Cease fire!” and Robison's apparently successful attempt to quell the friendly fire by ordering the detonation of a white star cluster.

It also shows Robison rushing into building #2 and up the stairs to find Nelson bleeding from the stump of his leg, attended by a medic applying a tourniquet. It records his frustrating attempts to get Nelson evacuated, and also his search for Suarez.

Most important, it records Robison's soldiers insisting to him that Nelson, Suarez and the others on the roof were hit by a tank shell.

More than one soldier who was on the roof can be heard telling Robison that they saw the tank fire.

In the footage, Robison supports their impression, saying he too saw the muzzle flash, but then backs down when a voice on the other end of the radio -- his superior officer, Capt. Enos -- tells him the men were hit with an Iraqi mortar.

He clearly imparts to the troops that life will be easier for all concerned if they get with the official story, whatever they may have witnessed firsthand.

By the evening of the next day, 24 hours after Enos' visit, the Army had initiated an official investigation into whether the deaths of Nelson and Suarez were the result of friendly fire. The investigation was handled under the auspices of the commander of the tank brigade that fired the shell, Col. Sean MacFarland.

There are a variety of flavors of Army investigations; they differ by degree of formality. In this case, the Army chose what is called a 15-6 investigation, an informal review typically carried out by a single officer investigating soldiers in his own unit who reports his results to the unit commander.

Salon obtained a copy of the investigation through the Freedom of Information Act. An Army major carried out the 15-6 and reported his results to MacFarland. The major's name is redacted in the copy sent to Salon.

According to the major's investigation delivered to MacFarland, shrapnel from a 120-millimeter U.S. tank round was found in building #2 after the incident.

But during the investigation, a captain (name redacted) had "verbally stated" that the same tank unit had returned to the scene the next day, Dec. 5, and allegedly fired 120-millimeter tank rounds into an unoccupied building to the southwest of building #2. The major determined that the fragments must have been from the Dec. 5 shots, somehow landing in building #2, and not from activity on Dec. 4.

(I interviewed three soldiers who claimed to have been in that area on Dec. 5. None recall any tank fire that day).

The investigation also found bullets in building #2 of the same caliber used in the M240 coaxial gun mounted next to the main turret of the tank.

These bullets, the investigation found, probably came from a Heckler & Koch G3 assault rifle fired by insurgents. The Heckler & Koch G3 is a German assault rifle commonly used by European and Eastern European armies that fires the same round as the M240 coaxial gun.

Fragments from one 120-millimeter mortar were also in the building.

MacFarland signed off on the findings and attached his own memo, dated Dec. 20, 2006. He noted that the soldiers of 2nd Platoon "fought well, demonstrating leadership and stamina in this long and complex firefight."

MacFarland wrote that the video was "only one piece of evidence to consider, taken from the perspective of the soldiers located in building #2." But he added that by "analyzing shrapnel found at the location, uniform scraps, impact point analysis and audio analysis of the video, it is clear that fratricide was not the cause of death." He added that "complete friendly force situational awareness will continue to be emphasized prior to every mission."

"Soldiers inside building #2 believed that the tank located to the west was firing on their position," MacFarland wrote. "When in actuality, it was enemy fire from a mortar position northwest of the Euphrates River."

After examining the evidence for several weeks, the investigation had arrived at the same explanation -- enemy mortar fire -- that Capt. Enos had apparently suggested to Robison over the radio within minutes of the incident.

On Dec. 15, 2006, before the report's completion, the Department of Defense announced Nelson and Suarez's deaths. "The Department of Defense announced today the death of two soldiers who were supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom," the Pentagon said in a statement. "They died December 4, 2006, in Ar Ramadi, Iraq, of injuries suffered from small arms fire while conducting security and observation operations." The Army posthumously awarded Nelson and Suarez the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

Then the effort began to get the soldiers of 2nd Platoon on message.

On Dec. 16, Lt. Col. Chuck Ferry e-mailed family members of some of the soldiers in the battalion. In part, his e-mail warned that soldiers who talked about casualties out of turn might be prosecuted.

"I want to remind everyone that it is a violation of operation security to discuss specific operations or casualties until after official notification has been made," he wrote.

"Soldiers who violate this are subject to punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Initial casualty information is often times incorrect and passing this information outside official channels often makes things worse for our families."

Several weeks later, after Christmas, battalion leaders assembled the soldiers from 2nd Platoon at Camp Corregidor in Ramadi for a briefing on the deaths of Suarez and Nelson. By that time, the troops knew that there was video of the incident. They had also heard untrue rumors -- the source of which remains unclear -- that the families of the men would not receive benefits if their deaths were found to be the result of friendly fire.

At the meeting, Lt. Col. Ferry and Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Bergmann told the troops that enemy mortars killed their comrades.

Soldiers interviewed by Salon confirmed that there was an enemy mortar position, but said that the tank shot building #2. According to one soldier who was present in building #2 during the firefight on Dec. 4 and who attended the briefing at Camp Corregidor, the message of the briefing and of Ferry's e-mail was clear.

"It is fucking plain as day that the tank shot at the building I was in and killed two of my friends," the soldier said. "And then we were all asked to lie about it."

"The colonel and sergeant major were not all bad," added another soldier from the company who fought near the tanks.

"But they did cover some shit up."

Since 2006, some of the soldiers involved have left the military. Others are back at Fort Carson in Colorado. The footage has circulated widely among soldiers who are stationed or have been stationed at Fort Carson, and beyond.

The video is also supported by firsthand accounts from troops who were on the scene and agreed, nearly two years after the incident, to talk to Salon if their names were not used. They requested anonymity because they feared retribution from the Army.

I have spoken to soldiers who were in three different vantage points inside and outside building #2.

“Immediately after the round hit, we were hit with coax,” a soldier who was in building #2 explained about what he said was machine gun fire from the tank's coaxial gun that followed the tank shell.

“There is no other way to explain that,” he said as he watched the video with me. “Nothing else sounds like that.”

Another soldier in the same company who was not in building #2 witnessed the event from a different perspective, sitting in a line of vehicles directly behind the tank as the turret pointed at building #2.

“I was behind the tank that shot the house,” he told me. “I saw the tank fire. The way it was oriented, it was pointed in that direction.”

Outside experts also confirmed that the deaths of Suarez and Nelson fit the pattern of a friendly fire incident. Three separate Army combat veterans reviewed the video and other Army documents from the incident obtained by Salon. All said they believed the tape showed a friendly fire incident involving a tank. “I believe the blast-injury deaths of Army Pfc. Suarez and Pfc. Nelson and the wounding of Iraqi soldiers appear to be caused by friendly fire -- a U.S. tank round fired at a building occupied by U.S. and Iraqi forces,” said Paul Sullivan, a former Army cavalry scout who once received friendly fire during the first Gulf War.

Sullivan, who is also executive director of Veterans for Common Sense, said the sound of the incoming rounds fit the pattern of a textbook tank attack against infantry.

He and the other veterans also noted that the incoming fire stops after the cease-fire is called and Robison's men shoot the white star cluster, warning of a friendly fire incident.

Those veterans also said the soldiers that appear on video do not react like troops under enemy attack: They do not call for reinforcements, retreat or mount a counterattack.

“It was a friendly fire incident,” a soldier from building #2 said, explaining why the soldiers on the tape don't act like soldiers taking enemy fire. “That is why we did not continue to do what we would normally do, because a tank fired on us.”

The combat veterans said a coverup would be unfortunate.

In addition to the corrosive nature of lying in the military, friendly fire incidents are supposed to be meticulously studied in order to prevent future, similar events. A coverup would preclude further study, potentially placing other soldiers at risk in the future.

Soldiers from Nelson and Suarez' company have not tried to share the video with the families of the deceased. Some said, however, that they were troubled that the families might not know the true circumstances surrounding their sons' deaths.

Families are often lost when it comes to how to deal with a suspected friendly fire incident.

Mary Tillman, mother of friendly fire casualty Pat, said she receives a steady drumbeat of unsolicited inquiries, often via e-mail through the Pat Tillman Foundation, from families who suspect friendly fire may be to blame for the death of a loved one. Often, the families are angry and desperate for more information from the Army after hearing stories from fellow soldiers that conflict with the official Army narrative in a particular death. "I hear lots of stories," she told me.

Tillman said she encourages the families to push the military hard for more answers and use whatever leverage is available to pry loose data, including the media. She said it is a painful process when families receive incomplete or conflicting information in dribs and drabs. "Your son dies many times when you get many stories," she said.

Both Roger Suarez's family and Albert Nelson's family apparently had questions about the way their sons died, and made an effort to get additional information from the military.

Pfc. Suarez's family is from Nicaragua, where he was buried. A Salon staff member fluent in Spanish worked to locate the family there but was unsuccessful. Salon succeeded in contacting Albert Nelson's family.

A Visit From An Official Commissioned Liar:

The sky blue government sedan had been waiting.

Jean Feggins had been out all day and was walking up toward the front door of her home on Dec. 5, 2006, when two men in Army uniforms stepped out of the sedan parked at the curb, and followed her up to the front steps.

"Are you Jean Feggins?" one of the uniformed men asked.

"Are you here about my son?" she responded.

"Yes, ma'am," one of the soldiers said, nervously folding his beret in his hands. "But we would rather talk to you about that inside."

The three went up the front steps, stepped inside the front door and turned left into a small den.

"We think you should sit down," one of the men said, gesturing to a brown sofa. "The United States Army regrets to inform you that your son, Albert Markee Nelson, has been killed in Iraq."

Nelson, whom his mother had always called Mark, had not even told his mother he was in Iraq. She thought he was still training at Fort Carson. He had only been in Iraq six weeks when he died. "Maybe he didn't want me to worry," Feggins said nearly two years after the casualty officers' visit, sitting on that same brown sofa.

Feggins is 53. She is taut and thin and looks too young to have six kids, five boys and a girl. Thirty-one at the time of his death, Pfc. Nelson was the oldest.

Feggins still regularly refers to Nelson as "my baby." He was good-looking, popular with the ladies, a natural jokester. In a scrapbook, he's hamming it up for the camera, striking a pose on some desert hill in Iraq, camels loping behind him. Feggins says that if they ever make a movie about 2nd Platoon, Will Smith should play Nelson's role. "They just seem so much alike," she told me.

"The casualty officer, the first day that I saw him, said, 'There is a possibility that your son was killed by friendly fire,'" she remembered. "But there was no proof yet. There was no report yet."

On Dec. 15, 2006, the Department of Defense announced that Nelson had been killed by small arms fire from the enemy. But then Feggins heard almost nothing further. She received the death certificate, which listed the cause of death as "homicide."

The Army told her the incident was under investigation. Weeks passed. Then months. By the following spring, Feggins still hadn't received any more information on her son's death.

It didn't feel right to Feggins. "Every night I was crying myself to sleep because I kept saying to myself, 'Something is wrong. I don't know what's wrong, but something is wrong,'" she remembered. "And (I wasn't) going to be able to relax or be comfortable or have closure, as they say, until I found out what going on."

She requested an autopsy report. She began writing letters and e-mails asking for answers. She wrote Nelson's chain of command. She wrote the president. "I know in my heart that the Army is lying about the circumstances surrounding his death," Feggins wrote in a Feb. 2, 2007, letter to the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Chuck Ferry, that she shared with me.

One day the phone rang. An officer was going to brief her on the death of her son. She had a meeting with an officer, whose name she still cannot recall. He had a laptop and a PowerPoint presentation showing that shrapnel from an enemy mortar had killed her son.

"He said to me, 'I know as a mother you are concerned about whether or not your son suffered. But I am here to tell you that your son didn't suffer,'" she recalled.

"He said, 'He was killed instantly. He was killed so fast that he didn't have time to feel pain, and he never knew what hit him,'" she remembered.

“He said, 'Also, when we found him on the roof, he was still in his position, holding his weapon.'”

“He just straight lied right in my face,” she said after watching the video that showed her son suffering for 25 minutes.

“And he did it with a straight face. I have a problem with that,” she added. “I understand friendly fire because I'm a police officer. I had friends who were killed in friendly fire ... I don't like liars and I cannot deal with lies.”

“These are the people that are in control of our safety and these are the people that the country is supposed to trust,” she said angrily.

“How are you going to trust somebody who can sit there and lie like that? They need to have more accountability,” she added. “It is so important to tell this story.”

And then, through tears, Feggins offered words of comfort to the surviving men of 2nd Platoon. Informed that some are haunted by what they insist was a friendly fire incident, followed by a coverup that includes hiding the truth from the families of the dead, she asked them not to feel guilty.

“For the soldiers that served with him, I just want you guys to know you are all my heroes, and I'm sorry that you had to go through that because I know what kind of friends Mark attracts and I know that it hurts you deeply, especially being told that you couldn't tell the truth about it,” she said through tears. “So now you are feeling some type of weight. But it's not your fault. You had to do what you had to do.”

In an effort to get the Army to respond to questions about the incident and the subsequent investigation, I contacted the Army and Fort Carson public affairs officials via telephone and e-mail in late September requesting interviews.

I sought to speak to leaders of the tank and infantry units involved in investigating the deaths of Nelson and Suarez. The interview requests stated that Salon had obtained “evidence suggesting that the two men were, in fact, killed by friendly fire.”

The Army demanded details on this evidence prior to granting any interviews. “Sir, I'm going to need some idea as to the nature of this new, solid reporting before we can start the interview,” Paul Boyce, an Army spokesman, wrote in a Sept. 25 e-mail. “I'm sure that with such solid journalist efforts you wouldn't mind at least saying specifically what has brought on such confidence.” I offered to detail the evidence during any interviews -- but not before.

Efforts to contact some of the officers directly produced similar results. “I'd like to know in advance what you think you have discovered,” Col. Sean MacFarland, the tank brigade commander who signed off on the Army's investigation, wrote in a Sept. 26 e-mail. “If it is new, I will make time to talk to you. Otherwise, I would not want to waste either of our valuable time.”

In a second e-mail, MacFarland said that “the supporting evidence” behind the Army’s investigation further proved that a tank did not kill Nelson and Suarez -- but that evidence could not be produced because it was classified. He did not consent to an interview.

The infantry battalion commander, Lt. Col. Chuck Ferry, was curt. “Don’t know who you are and I am not familiar with your organization,” he wrote on Sept. 30 in response to an interview request. “Sounds like you have already made up your mind about your story. Why should I talk to you?”

Ultimately Boyce, the Army spokesman, forwarded a written statement that didn’t diverge from the findings of the Army’s 2006 investigation. He reiterated the report’s finding that two mortars landing simultaneously killed Nelson and Suarez. Boyce wrote, “Shrapnel, uniform scraps, impact-point analysis and audio analysis of the Soldier’s video clearly show fratricide did not occur during the attack.”

THIS ENVIRONMENT IS HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH; ALL HOME, NOW



A U.S. military bomb technician retrieves the hair of a bomber after an attack in Baqouba, 35 miles (60 kilometers) northeast of Baghdad Oct. 8, 2008. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

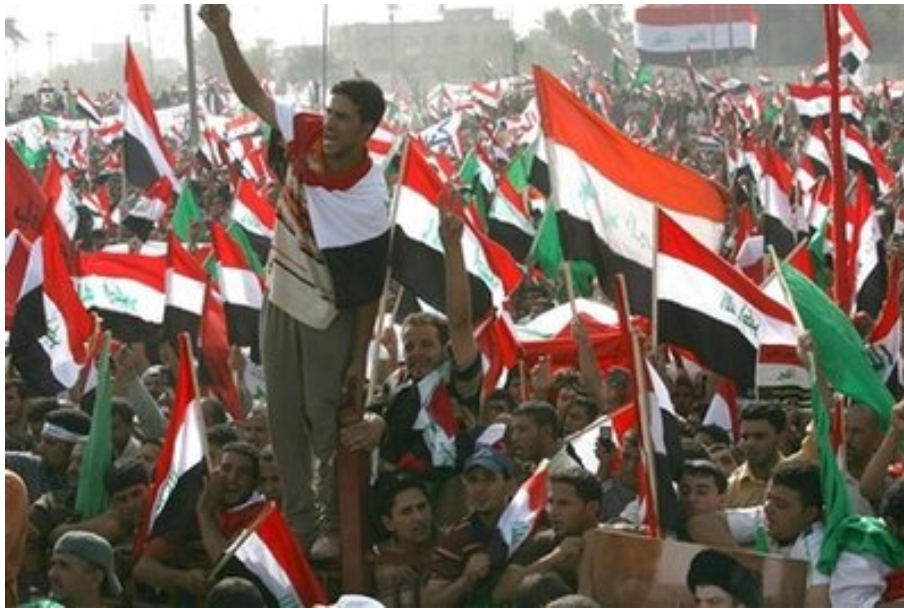
IRAQ RESISTANCE ROUNDUP



Thousands of Iraqis rally in Baghdad Oct. 18, 2008 to condemn a draft U.S.-Iraqi security agreement. The mass show of opposition is to a deal that would extend the presence of American forces in Iraq beyond the end of this year. (Kareem Raheem/Reuters)



Thousands of demonstrators carry banners and Iraqi national flags during a protest march in Baghdad's Sadr City October 18, 2008. The mass show of opposition is to a deal that would extend the presence of American forces in Iraq beyond the end of this year. (Kareem Raheem/Reuters)



Thousands of demonstrators carry banners and Iraqi national flags during a protest march in Baghdad's Sadr City October 18, 2008. The mass show of opposition is to a deal that would extend the presence of American forces in Iraq beyond the end of this year. (AP Photo/Hadi Mizban)



Iraqis burn the effigies of U.S. President George W. Bush, right and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, during a rally in Baghdad Oct. 18, 2008, to protest a draft U.S.-Iraqi security agreement. The mass show of opposition is to a deal that would extend the presence of American forces in Iraq beyond the end of this year. (AP Photo/Hadi Mizban)



Iraqi women hold up national flags as thousands of Iraqis opposed to the US Occupation marched on October 18 through the streets of Baghdad. (AFP/Ahmad al-Rubaye)



Iraqis opposed to the US Occupation tear down a pro-occupation propaganda billboard. Thousands more took the streets of Baghdad against continuing the US occupation in Iraq. (AFP/Ahmad al-Rubaye)

“We Are Soooo Happy To See Our Liberators!”



Iraqis stare at a U.S. soldier near Baquba in Diyala province, some 65 km (40 miles) northeast of Baghdad October 18, 2008. REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic



(Graphic: London Financial Times)

“The single largest failure of the anti-war movement at this point is the lack of outreach to the troops.” Tim Goodrich, Iraq Veterans Against The War

“The military are the final, essential weak point of Bush and Cheney.” David McReynolds 9.29.07

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Our goal is for Traveling Soldier to become the thread that ties working-class people inside the armed services together. We want this newsletter to be a weapon to help you organize resistance within the armed forces.

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