

Mary Tillman's Private War

After football star turned Army Ranger Pat Tillman died in Afghanistan, his mother took on the government to reveal the truth behind his death.

By Sally Lee

It is one of the defining stories of America's long, heartbreaking war in Afghanistan. Less than a year after 9/11 and shortly after marrying his childhood sweetheart, Pat Tillman, 25, walked away from a multimillion-dollar NFL contract to join the Army's elite Rangers, along with his younger brother Kevin. "Even though he loved football, Pat didn't want to be part of some superficial game when there were people putting their lives on the line," says his mother, Mary Tillman, whose family saga is the subject of a riveting new documentary film, *The Tillman Story*. "I tried talking them out of it, but once I realized that wasn't going to happen it was important that I support them."

During Pat's second tour of duty, in April 2004, Mary received the news all military mothers dread. "I was at home and got a message to call my daughter-in-law, Marie. I had a bad feeling about it," she says. "When I asked her what's going on, she didn't say a word. I asked again, and she was still silent. I got more upset. Then she told me Pat had been killed."

Despite Pat's expressed wish not to have a military funeral, the Army gave him a hero's goodbye, complete with a Silver Star, at a public memorial attended by Army brass and luminaries like Senator John McCain and California First Lady Maria Shriver. The official story was that he died in a firefight with the Taliban as he charged up a hill "without regard for his own safety."

The Sham

It turned out to be a sham. Five weeks later, after several internal investigations, the Army admitted Pat did not go down in a blaze of glory but was "probably" killed by friendly fire. "I didn't quite believe the original story to begin with," Mary says now. "Not that Pat wasn't terribly heroic. He was. But it was a little too pretty -- like a movie. Pat was the highest-profile soldier they had," she adds. "They wanted to rally support -- and make people angry at the enemy."

But the Army's new story also raised questions. How did the friendly fire happen? Why wasn't there a criminal investigation immediately after the incident? Mary Tillman went on to spend the next four years poring over thousands of military documents for clues. She later chronicled her investigation in her 2008 memoir, *Boots on the Ground by Dusk*.

Working day and night ("I didn't sleep much," she says) in the Northern California cottage where she raised Pat and his two younger brothers (Richard is the youngest), she did not relent until she got answers. Even though parts of those military files were blacked out, she pieced together what she considers to be evidence of a cover-up. She says Pat's body armor, uniform and military journal had been burned, in breach of protocol, in a barrel on his Army base in the middle of the night. According to Mary, documents revealed questionable behavior on the part of the platoon soldiers in Pat's unit. The more she discovered, the more questions Mary had. Why had soldiers fired on her son when they'd allegedly seen arms waving, another flagrant violation of Army rules? Why did a field hospital report say Pat was transferred to an ICU for CPR when, in fact, he had been shot in the head and died instantly? Such details were "chilling and horrifying," Mary says, but what drove her was knowing that Pat himself would have "busted down doors to get the truth" had something like this happened to another family member. "He wouldn't have stood for it," she says.

Getting Answers

Although Mary logged the hours, it was an angry letter to military investigators from her ex-husband, Patrick Tillman Sr., a San Jose, California, attorney, that eventually led to a Congressional hearing. That April 2007 inquiry -- during which both Mary and her son Kevin, who was discharged a year after Pat's death, testified -- accused the military of smoke-screening. It led to a second Congressional hearing, four months later, that focused on an internal memo from Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, then commander of a Special Operations task force in Afghanistan. In a message to other high-ranking military personnel written days after Pat's death, McChrystal reportedly warned, "It might cause public embarrassment if the circumstances of Corporal Tillman's death become public." But in dramatic testimony shown in the documentary, an all-star panel of generals denied any part in a cover-up. Most couldn't recall ever receiving McChrystal's memo. Instead, the blame was put mostly on Lt. Gen. Philip Kensinger, a three-star general, by then retired, who led the Army's special operations forces after 9/11. "As I sat in that second hearing," Mary says, "I went from feeling angry to just numb resignation that nothing more was going to be done. No one was going to hold anyone accountable for their actions."

Mary says she is done pressing for answers. "Pat would not have wanted us to spend our lives doing this," she says. For the past year she has been a grief counselor at a Catholic cemetery and she is in touch with other military mothers whose children have died. "You realize everybody has their tragedies and you're not alone," she says.

"There are still times, of course, I am very sad and it hits me just like it did the first time I heard the news," she says. "But I'm comforted having a sense of who Pat was. He's still vivid in my mind. When I talk about him, it's like he's still around. He makes me appreciate life."

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