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The US Soldier Who Committed Suicide After She Refused to Take Part in Torture

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With each revelation, or court decision, on US torture in Iraq, Afghanistan and Gitmo—or the airing this month of *The Tillman Story* and Lawrence Wright's *My Trip to Al-Qaeda*—I am reminded of the chilling story of Alyssa Peterson, who died seven years ago this week. Appalled when ordered to take part in interrogations that, no doubt, involved what most would call torture, she refused, then killed herself a few days later, on September 15, 2003.

Of course, we now know from the torture memos and the US Senate committee probe and various press reports, that the "Gitmo-izing" of Iraq was happening just at the time Alyssa got swept up in it.



Spc. Alyssa Peterson was one of the first female soldiers who died in Iraq. Her death under these circumstances should have drawn wide attention. It's not exactly the Tillman case, but a cover-up, naturally, followed.

Peterson, 27, a Flagstaff, Ariz., native, served with C Company, 311th Military Intelligence BN, 101st Airborne. She was a valuable Arabic-speaking interrogator assigned to the prison at our air base in troubled Tal Afar in northwestern Iraq. According to official records, she died on September 15, 2003, from a "non-hostile weapons discharge."

A "non-hostile weapons discharge" leading to death is not unusual in Iraq, often quite accidental, so this one apparently raised few eyebrows. The *Arizona Republic*, three days after her death, reported that Army officials "said that a number of possible scenarios are being considered, including Peterson's own weapon discharging, the weapon of another soldier discharging, or the accidental shooting of Peterson by an Iraqi civilian." And that might have ended it right there.

But in this case, a longtime radio and newspaper reporter named Kevin Elston, not satisfied with the public story, decided to probe deeper in 2005, "just on a hunch," he told me in late 2006. He made "hundreds of phone calls" to the military and couldn't get anywhere, so he filed a Freedom of Information Act [FOIA] request. When the documents of the official investigation of her death arrived, they contained bombshell revelations.

Here's what the Flagstaff public radio station, KNAU, where Elston worked, reported: "Peterson objected to the interrogation techniques used on prisoners. She refused to participate after only two nights working in the unit known as the cage. Army spokespersons for her unit have refused to describe the interrogation techniques Alyssa objected to. They say all records of those techniques have now been destroyed."

The official probe of her death would later note that earlier she had been "reprimanded" for showing "empathy" for the prisoners. One of the most moving parts of the report, in fact, is this: "She said that she did not know how to be two people; she...could not be one person in the cage and another outside the wire."

She was then assigned to the base gate, where she monitored Iraqi guards, and sent to suicide prevention training. "But on the night of September 15th, 2003, Army investigators concluded she shot and killed herself with her service rifle," the documents disclose.

The official report revealed that a notebook she had written in was found next to her body, but blacked out its contents.

The Army talked to some of Peterson's colleagues. Asked to summarize their comments, Elston told me: "The reactions to the suicide were that she was having a difficult time separating her personal feelings from her professional duties. That was the consistent point in the testimonies, that she objected to the interrogation techniques, without describing what those techniques were."

Elston said that the documents also refer to a suicide note found on her body, which suggested that she found it ironic that suicide prevention training had taught her how to commit suicide. He filed another FOIA request for a copy of the actual note. It did not emerge.

Peterson, a devout Mormon—her mother, Bobbi, claims she always stuck up for "the underdog"—had graduated from Flagstaff High School and earned a psychology degree from Northern Arizona University on a military scholarship. She was trained in interrogation techniques at Fort Huachuca in Arizona, and was sent to the Middle East in 2003, reportedly going in place of another soldier who did not wish to go.

A report in *The Arizona Daily Sun* of Flagstaff—three years after Alyssa's death—revealed that Spc. Peterson's mother, reached at her home in northern Arizona, said that neither she nor her husband Richard had received any official documents that contained information outlined in Elston's report.

In other words: Like the press and the public, even the parents had been kept in the dark.



Kayla Williams, an Army sergeant who served with Alyssa, told me me that she talked to her about her problems shortly before she killed herself. Williams also was forced to take part in torture interrogations, where she saw detainees punched. Another favorite technique: strip the prisoners and then remove their blindfolds so that the first thing they saw was Kayla Williams.

She also opted out, but survived, and is haunted years later. She wrote a book about her experience in the military, *Love My Rifle More Than You*.

Here's what Williams told Soledad O'Brien of CNN: "I was asked to assist. And what I saw was that individuals who were doing interrogations had slipped over a line and were really doing things that were inappropriate. There were prisoners that were burned with lit cigarettes."

When I wrote a piece about Peterson last year, her brother, Spencer Peterson, left a comment:

Alyssa is my little sister. I usually don't comment on boards like this, and I don't speak for the rest of my family (especially my folks), but I think she probably did kill herself over this. She was extremely sensitive and empathetic to others, and cared a lot more about the welfare and well-being of the people around her than she cared about herself... Thank you to everyone for your continued support of our troops and our family. Alyssa's death was a tremendous loss to everyone who knew her, and we miss her sweet and sensitive spirit. No one is happier than I am that (many of) our troops are coming home from Iraq, and I pray that the rest of our brave soldiers return home safely as soon as possible. Support our troops—bring them home!

Kayla Williams told me she spoke with Alyssa Peterson about the young woman's troubles a week before she died—and afterward, attended her memorial service.

So what, in Williams's view, caused Alyssa Peterson to put a bullet in her head in September 2003 after just a few weeks in Iraq? And why were the press and the public not told about it? Much more from Kayla and another woman who served with her, in Part II of this article tomorrow. [Here's](#) ^[1] a moving slide show with narration by Alyssa's mom.