

# An Un-American Tragedy

ESPN.com - <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/eticket/story?page=tillmanpart1>

## GOALS

To uncover the truth about the events that led to the death of Pat Tillman, the Army Ranger who spurned a lucrative NFL contract to serve his country in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Army's initial report that Tillman had died heroically while battling Taliban fighters in the hills of Afghanistan proved a gross embellishment. Turns out that Tillman died at the hands of his fellow soldiers, several of whom were variously reprimanded by the Army for their part in the incident. To this day, U.S. military officials have yet to satisfactorily complete a formal investigation and U.S. lawmakers are posturing for a Capitol Hill inquiry.

## APPROACH

After crisscrossing the country to conduct the first interviews of the key soldiers involved in the battle, and relying on initial Army reports of the incident, ESPN.com set out to reconstruct the events as they unfolded, both in the prelude and aftermath of the former star athlete's death.

## TEAM

- Investigative reporter: 1
- Investigative consultant: 1
- Project editors: 2
- Project coordinator: 1
- Multimedia editors: 2
- Designers: 2
- Technical producer: 1
- Fact checkers: lots

## TIMELINE

With several significant stories to be told (How did Tillman actually die? How did the erroneous story of his death evolve? Why did he become the first known soldier killed by fratricide to be awarded the Silver Star for valor?), the initial plan was to reconstruct the firefight through narrative storytelling, companion video features, an animated recreation of the battle and interactive maps pinpointing where everything went down on the far side of the world. The best laid plans would have targeted publishing for mid-August, in advance of the expected conclusion of the Army's Inspector General's current investigation. Due to competitive circumstances, though, the timetable changed dramatically and we scrambled to turn the project around in less than two week's time.



**ETICKET**  
An American Tragedy  
Part One: Pat Tillman's Uncertain Death  
By Mike Fish | ESPN.com

Early in the evening of April 22, 2004, a heavily armored vehicle in the trailing half of a split platoon came under attack from enemy fire in the rugged mountainous terrain of southeastern Afghanistan. Soldiers in a Humvee opened fire in retaliation but instead shot at fellow Rangers positioned ahead, killing Pat Tillman and an Afghan soldier standing 10 feet off Tillman's left shoulder. The former NFL safety — the Army's most celebrated volunteer — took three bullets to the forehead.

Three days removed from the ambush and the ensuing firefight, it wasn't the memory of the rounds of gunshots raining clouds of rock and dust down the towering canyon walls that troubled Spc. Ryan Mansfield. It was the madness of making sense of it all.

Spc. Pat Tillman was dead.

Sitting in a cramped tent at Camp Salerno, the Army's Forward Operating Base in the province of Khowst, Afghanistan, Mansfield witnessed the raw emotion and friction in the unit as the soldiers agonized over the tragic outcome of the mission. An Army chaplain pulled up a seat. So did an Army psychiatrist as squad leaders and high-ranking officers joined the 30 or so young Rangers still fresh from their first firefight.

The soldiers in the Black Sheep platoon didn't need a tidy, bureaucratic Army inquiry to tell them what they already knew: Pat Tillman had been killed in a case of fratricide, otherwise known as friendly fire, by someone among them at the meeting.

By then, they knew that. Like Mansfield, though, many of them were struggling with how it had happened. With why it had happened. With the awful onomasty of it all.

"It was emotional," said Mansfield, then 20 years old and a gurner in the vehicle that had been just in front of Tillman's, in an interview with ESPN.com. "Some people had things they said that other people didn't want to hear. It was just pretty personal. People in the second serial (the trailing half of the platoon) had a different perspective of what happened than people in the first..."

Two years after Tillman's death, the perspectives on the circumstances are still very much at odds and the story is still very much alive. As the Defense Department Inspector General's Office nears the completion of yet another investigation into Tillman's death, many very important questions remain unanswered.

- Are the Rangers who fired at Tillman and their other fellow soldiers guilty of criminal wrongdoing?
- Why did the Army glorify Tillman's actions on the battlefield during the firefight in which he was killed?
- Did the Army purposely conceal that Tillman had been killed by friendly fire? If so, why?
- And did the Army consciously puff up the Tillman story by awarding the dead soldier a Silver Star, its third-highest distinction for combat valor, to go along with his Purple Heart and a posthumous promotion from specialist to corporal?

For reasons that remain under investigation more than two years later, the Pentagon elected for almost five weeks after the incident not to disclose the fact Tillman had been gunned down by members of his own platoon. Yet some in Tillman's unit knew the night it happened. ESPN.com found that word of the fratricide had filtered through the ranks within a day or two of Tillman's death.

Army brass calling the shots from Camp Salerno also understood what had to be, for them, the discomfiting news about the elite group of soldiers expected to live and fight by a Ranger Creed that reads, in part, "I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy, and under no circumstances will I ever embarrass my country." According to one of the documents obtained by ESPN.com, an Army official flew in to join the platoon the day after the shooting as part of the April 25, 2004, debriefing process told Army investigators. "I think at that point people already knew that it was a fratricide," he said. "So when I say 'people'... [I mean] leadership, okay."

In the meeting three days after Tillman's death, however, chaos and unanswered questions dominated the warm night as Mansfield and the rest of the unit tried to understand how a Ranger — one of the soldiers who even then was with them under their tent — had killed the most famous soldier in the war. As the meeting progressed, the young men took turns putting their piece of the big picture. Words like "bad judgment" and "panic" were tossed about. Gossip and suspicion flowed freely.

Because of the gruesome damage done to Tillman's head by the gunfire, popular theory first focused on a soldier who'd manned a .50-caliber machine gun as the likely shooter, but Army documents show that investigators later dismissed that idea. That soldier left the Army when his enlistment ended and declined several interview requests by ESPN.com.

A few of the Rangers piped up, according to two soldiers in attendance that evening, to suggest Tillman had been overly aggressive when he took his position low on the desolate ridge. In one of the Army documents, an officer assigned to observe the reaction of the Rangers during the debriefing session later told investigators, "a lot of them felt like his [Tillman's] actions that day had put himself and [Spc. Bryan O'Neal] and the Afghan soldier in peril that was unnecessary."

O'Neal, an 18-year-old soldier who had been positioned on the ridge just a few yards from Tillman during the firefight, sat quietly through most of the meeting. Eventually, though, his few, riveting words brought a hush over the assembled platoon. Another soldier at the session, Spc. Pedro Arreola, told ESPN.com that O'Neal, fighting back tears and shaking with emotion, said: "The only reason I am standing here is because Pat Tillman saved my life."

## BUDGET

Unspecified at outset. Not really sure that we want to know, to be honest. This is pro-bono journalism at its essence. Pages were scrubbed of advertisements of all kinds.

## TRAFFIC

Not available

## TECHNOLOGIES

- Flash
- XML (for audio feeds)
- CSS

## LESSONS LEARNED

- Encourage designers to get an early jump on getting an early jump. Even the smallest of head-starts can be difference-makers in turning around projects.
- Be patient under duress. Don't let circumstances entirely dictate your timetable.
- When pursuing an investigative story, be prepared to not react when competitors report incremental advancements. Being right and being complete are paramount.
- Be prepared to sacrifice the coolest element(s) for the greater good of the project.

