‘Skylarking’: Homosexual Panic and the Death of Private Kovco

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyses key examples of language used during the recent case of Private Jake Kovco, the first Australian soldier to die during Australia’s military involvement in Iraq. Kovco died not in combat but in his barracks room, shot in the head by his own pistol. In particular, the essay considers the implications of the military inquiry being told that Kovco may have accidentally shot himself while joking with his roommates ‘in a female/homosexual way’, the gun held to his head ‘almost to say this is so gay I would rather be dead’. Payne revisits Sedgwick's concept of 'homosexual panic' to argue that the erasure of homophobia from the record of the incident (euphemised as 'skylarking') contributes to the normalisation of homophobia as an unworthy source of social and political panic, precisely because of the 'systemic function' Sedgwick attributes to homosexual panic in reinforcing heterosexual masculine entitlement.

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room, shot in the head by his own pistol. In particular, the essay considers the implications of the military inquiry being told that Kovco may have accidentally shot himself while joking with his roommates ‘in a female/homosexual way’, the gun held to his Jacob (Jake) Bruce Kovco (25 September 1980, Melbourne – 21 April 2006, Baghdad) was a Private (PTE) in the Australian Army who died while deployed in Iraq, fatally wounded by a single shot to the head from his own Browning 9mm sidearm. PTE Kovco was the first Australian soldier to die while deployed to the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO). A military inquiry found that Kovco accidentally shot himself while mishandling his pistol, a conclusion which was disputed by his family. On 2 April 2008, a PTE Kovco was originally scheduled to be returned to Australia on Wednesday, 26 April, but his body was apparently misplaced during attempts to repatriate it to Melbourne, and the body of 47 year old Bosnian civilian contractor Juso Sinanovic was sent to Australia in its place — a mistake Brendan Nelson has blamed on a mortuary attached to the Al-Sabah General Hospital. in Kuwait and the private contractor Kenyon International. [http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/contractor-cant-explain-mix-up/2006/04/27/1145861469125.html "Contractor can't explain mix-up"], "The Age&