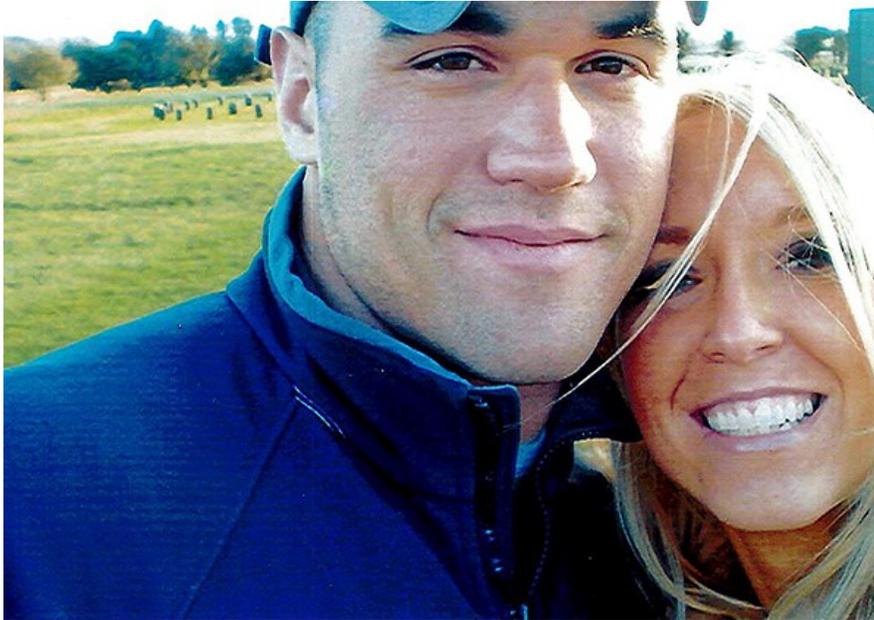


Justin Pope was shot and killed in Iraq in 2009 – his family is still trying to figure out who pulled the trigger

Far from home

By Ryan Felton 



Courtesy photo

Justin and Ashley Pope.

This much is known: Justin Pope is dead.

Pope was a 25-year-old with tours of Iraq and Afghanistan under his belt as a corporal in the Marines before being honorably discharged and taking a job with DynCorp International, a private military contractor that provided security at the U.S. Embassy in Iraq in 2007.

It was supposed to be an auspicious employment turn for the metro Detroit man — the job suited him perfectly, according to his family — but just two years after signing on, Pope was dead, killed amid his friends and colleagues in early 2009 on the DynCorp base.

His family has spent the last six years looking for answers, asking politely at first, but eventually battling with DynCorp in a three-year legal battle when they discovered the officially sanctioned and ever-changing narrative of the fatal evening never lined up with what the family had found.

The company line for the events of March 4, 2009, goes like this: A night of roughhousing and binge drinking led to an unfortunate incident of Russian roulette. According to DynCorp, Pope — whose toxicology report later revealed he was stone cold sober — and his best friend, Kyle Palmer, were in a room on the Erbil base. A 9 mm semi-automatic handgun was pulled out. The two "playfully" fought. Palmer, who was two bottles of wine, a few beers, and several shots of Jack Daniels deep, fired off a round within inches of his best friend's face. The bullet passed through Pope's brain and out the back of his head. It was all an accident. A sad, tragic

accident, but an accident nonetheless. (Palmer pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter and was given a three-year federal prison sentence in 2010.)

Pope's family — his widow, their 14-year-old son, mother, stepfather, brothers, and sisters — wholly disputes that account, pointing to inconsistencies in a lengthy U.S. State Department investigation into the incident as well as evidence of what they say was the contractor's attempts at covering up what really happened. (DynCorp, the State Department, and lawyers for Palmer did not respond to requests for comment for this article.) To start with, DynCorp initially told them Pope died alone. They'd later learn there were about a dozen people in the room, the size of a small office, at the time.

The tragic details are contained in a thick file in U.S. District Court in Detroit. It also includes official accounts of the homicide, handwritten letters, sworn testimony, and depositions. The trial is slated to begin later this year, and though the family remains open to a settlement — a mediation conference is scheduled in the coming weeks — they're committed to seeing the trial through to the end if it means they can finally learn the truth.

DynCorp was "coming up with whatever stories sounded right at the moment to give to the family," says Julie Hurwitz, who represents Pope's family along with William Goodman and Katie Kalahar. "As that turned out to not be true — which didn't take very long — they would come up with different stories. And every story was tainted with this overlay of, 'We have to make sure that we don't look bad. We have to make sure it doesn't come back to point at us for being blamed for what happened to Justin.' Whatever the truth is, they didn't care what impact it had on this family."

Pope's family wants what every family wants: a chance to grieve, which they haven't been able to do in the face of the uncertainty.

The lawsuit is not about "what caused Justin's death," says Hurwitz. "It's what's DynCorp did to cover up its responsibility for Justin's death, and its emotional impact this would have on the family."

'It was just a matter of time'

Torture.

That's the word Pope's mother, Patricia Salser, uses when asked to describe the feeling of being unable to cope with her son's death.

"It's torture," she says, repeating the word several times in an interview last month at her lawyers' offices.

The son she lost was an upstanding individual, a guy hell-bent on protecting others from the moment he could walk.

"Ever since I can remember, he always loved action figures," Salser says. "And he was like the sweetest little kid — he was just very kind. As he became older he just seemed to be more into camouflage and G.I. Joe and army men and wars and tents. [That] escalated into being into special books about wars and et cetera."

And that early fascination led to an early declaration that he wanted to join the Army.

"As he became older he changed it to a Marine," Salser says. "I always thought he'd outgrow it because all my children said they wanted to be something and those things changed."

But Pope was committed and his patriotism inflected all points of his life — his closet was awash in camouflage clothes, his desk adorned with a bevy of books on war.

Even as a kid, "he would wear my police shirt and badge and he would patrol the neighborhood and stop kids from walking across the street without looking, and then let them go," says Bill Salser, a former police officer who married Patricia when Pope was 7 years old. He and Patricia would hear stories about Pope's heroic career in the Marines, when he spent time patrolling the streets of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The family was studiously religious. Pope met his wife, Ashley, at a church event in Riverview when they were both 15. They married in March 2003, soon after Pope graduated from Marine boot camp. The family spent the next few years living at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.

They moved to an upscale Commerce Township subdivision after Pope joined DynCorp in 2007, which gave the couple a \$180,000 salary that afforded the move. While he was across the Atlantic, Ashley told the U.S. State Department she talked with Pope by phone at least twice a day, and the couple chatted via instant message constantly.

She'd hear all about the life on the DynCorp base. It was that environment, some employees interviewed by the State Department say, which served as a catalyst for his death.

Contrary to DynCorp and State Department policies, drinking was not only common on the base in Erbil, Iraq, but rampant. In this light, the alcohol-fueled shooting wasn't just an accident, but an end-result of DynCorp facilitating such a living space, as one employee put it. (DynCorp says in court filings that a State Department policy banning drinking on base was not "directed" at the company.)

"In my opinion, it was just a matter of time until something happened," Jeffrey Black, a DynCorp employee, said in a deposition last September. "Something — that type of behavior is not just going to continue until something bad is going to happen. It was just a matter of time."

It's also the reason, according to Palmer, why he shot someone he called his best friend, a guy he'd known since the pair met at infantry training.

Pope's death "probably wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been drinking," Palmer told Special Agent Scott Banker of the U.S. State Department on Sept. 14, 2009.

One shot

From the onset, the investigation into the aftermath of Pope's death produced a picture of a frenetic scene.

Prior to the incident, according to the State Department's file, the night of March 4 was a seemingly banal evening: Some employees went out to a restaurant for a meal. Others checked their email. Another group washed and cleaned company vehicles.

Palmer spent some time alone before the incident. Around 10 p.m. that night, he left a meeting and went to his room, popped the cork on a bottle of wine, and proceeded to watch a handful of episodes of *Sons of Anarchy*. He drank the wine out of a coffee cup. After finishing one bottle, he opened another.

DynCorp employee Cory Igo recalled in a deposition that when Palmer stopped by his room, he was drunk to the point of "slurring his speech" and generally very "hyper." Igo told federal agents that a group of about a half-dozen employees then moved to Pope's room and began to drink heavily.

Around 11:45 p.m., according to Igo's version of events, Palmer and Pope were wrestling on one side of the room. Soon after, a 9 mm Glock 19 was pulled out. DynCorp contends it belonged to Pope. Witnesses offer conflicting accounts of who grabbed the gun — that's the case with any number of the details in the file — but according to Igo, that man was Pope.

"Pope gave him a look of confidence that it was OK to handle the weapon and it was at this point Igo decided to move over to [the other] side of the room," the State Department's file says.

When the shot was fired, Igo said he was standing near the fridge talking to other DynCorp employees. The State Department's report says Igo recalled Pope making "a statement about the gun prior to it firing that didn't seem funny but rather sounded dangerous."

Igo couldn't clarify when asked by agents if he recalled the statement.

Jason Hillestad, Pope's roommate and DynCorp employee, said Pope pointed the pistol at Palmer's head and began egging on his best friend to grab the Glock from his hands.

While roughhousing between Pope and Palmer was common, according to Hillestad, he never witnessed the pair goof off with a weapon in hand. (Palmer would tell federal agents the pair would "fool around" with a gun once a month.)

But the horseplay wasn't included in other witnesses' version of events. Mark Tanner, a DynCorp contractor, said he was looking at Pope at the time of the shot, just before midnight. According to the State Department report, Tanner — who had drunk a half-dozen cocktails that night — said he was in and out of the room all night, but didn't see "any horseplay or gunplay between Pope and Palmer."

So did Pope have the gun? Or did Palmer? Again, the files are unclear on that point, and multiple witnesses say they couldn't discern either way.

According to Palmer, he had the upper hand, and Pope shouted at him to "pull the trigger" — though "none of the other people in the room" can corroborate that point, according to Goodman, one of the family's attorneys.

But Palmer says after his friend uttered that sentence, he fired one shot.

Immediately after, witnesses say Palmer left the room, went into the street, and began to repeatedly yell, "I shot Pope."

Michael Boffo, who at the time was the project manager for DynCorp International's protective services unit in Iraq, responded by telling Palmer to "stop saying that." Boffo also told federal agents that Palmer, who was engaged to his daughter, also said, "My best friend's dead" and "I shot my best friend."

Within an hour of the shooting, a helicopter arrived to transport Pope to the hospital. Apparently, Boffo didn't see the use. According to one employee's account, Boffo simply stated: "If there's no pulse, then why are we going to medevac him? I'm just being realistic."

That remark stings Patricia Salsler to this day.

"The thing about Boffo that is heart-wrenching for me is that he came to Michigan to meet me and my husband with his wife," she says. "I met him for a lunch at a restaurant — and I had my suspicions already — but to believe that that man who I sat at a table with literally was letting my son just lie there and he didn't even want someone to give him help. He was just going to let him lie there like an animal on the side of the road to die. That's the kind of man that we are talking about."

Pope was pronounced dead at 3:52 a.m. March 5.

Claims of a cover-up

What happened next is, not surprisingly, a matter of conflict.

Pope's family alleges that top representatives at the base ordered employees present at Pope's shooting to go into a room and "not come out until they had agreed upon a story as to how it had happened so they could conceal the truth."

Jeffrey Black was not a witness to the shooting but was on-site for the emergency 4 a.m. meeting, according to the State Department file, and said in a deposition that "every single person in that house, they put them all in the same room to get their stories straight." On ordering such a move amid a criminal investigation, Black, who is a current state trooper in Pennsylvania, put it bluntly: "That's 101; don't do that."

But, as *MT* previously reported in a 2012 story on this case, a man present in the room (who only spoke on the condition of anonymity and who is also named a defendant in the Pope family's lawsuit) denied that employees were ordered to coordinate their stories.

One witness told investigators he saw Boffo "enter a conference room and instruct

the team to not mention alcohol use." Paul Sovitsky, a DynCorp employee, said it was readily apparent the "wild partying type of atmosphere" was being covered up.

"Management didn't want that out," he said in a deposition. "That policy by DynCorp was a joke. I mean, it was completely — prior to that time, it was kind of like a wink and a nod. And by that time, the State Department, if I remember correctly, had already come down and said no drinking. And so they didn't want that connected."

'Tone it down. Don't say that.'

Whatever the directives that night and what was or wasn't said, the file makes clear that drinking was a commonality on the base.

Multiple interviews and videos taken with employees at the DynCorp compound (that have since been entered into court records) illustrate a pervasive and common binge-drinking atmosphere. One employee, when deposed, compared the environment to *Animal House*. Another says it was common for employees to bring a "case of beers" out to a fire pit each night.

Black says management facilitated the party atmosphere.

"In Erbil, it was common knowledge," he said in a deposition. "You could not have lived on that compound and not known the type of partying that was going on or being tolerated and allowed to happen."

Noah Flemming, who says he considered Pope a close friend, offered his view of the incident in a sworn statement that alluded to the widespread drinking on the base, suggesting there was concern that the company's relaxed policy on boozing would be discovered as a result of Pope's death.

Flemming told federal agents that prior to the shooting, Palmer "started trying to wrestle the pistol away from Justin" before the round went off. Then, Flemming said, his first instinct was "to clean up the beer."

Two employees told federal agents that the room was "sanitized of alcohol." The employees also say Boffo, a former Marine, was spotted removing items from the room. Boffo, who is no longer with DynCorp, supervised a group of 151 people, court records show.

Employees were "running around" outside of Pope's room "putting alcohol in the trash," according to one employee. "A large quantity" of empty and full Corona bottles were recovered in garbage bags, according to the State Department's notes.

And Boffo wasn't done directing the alleged cover-up, according to one employee's recollection. He called another meeting March 5 and when one employee asked "what to say about being drunk the night of the 4th," Boffo's alleged response was this: "Tone it down. Don't say that."

That perception of Boffo's edict to erase alcohol from the conversation was backed up by Resurrection Demacablin, another DynCorp worker, who said he overheard a conversation later that night between Boffo and Derrick Agustin, another DynCorp employee, about drinking on the compound. According to the State Department file, Agustin said of the night Pope died: "We were all pretty blitzed." Boffo responded by saying, "It is comments like that that don't need to be said."

Whatever DynCorp's feelings were toward imbibing on the compound, the State Department report suggests it was of high concern.

Pope and Palmer, for example, both signed U.S. State Department forms acknowledging firearms use while serving as contractors at the U.S. Embassy in Iraq. The form includes this line: "I will not consume alcohol or controlled substances before or during handling of any weapon as outlined in the Mission Firearms Policy."

The policy, records show, was to apply to any "direct-hire or contractor."

Under a section of the policy titled "Restriction on the Use of Alcohol and Drugs," it states:

"Employees will not consume any alcoholic beverages or be under the influence of alcohol or drugs while armed. Employees will not consume alcohol six hours prior to carrying firearms. An employee who is caught breaking this policy will be relieved of their duties and denied future access to the Embassy compound."

Also, disciplinary action may be taken in the event an employee was found in "possession of a firearm while under the influence of alcohol or drugs," the policy says. A possible resolution: "removal from the post" at the Embassy.

Feds remove 11 DynCorp employees

Nothing happened to DynCorp's lucrative \$1.2 billion contract with the State Department after Pope's death, but the compound wasn't left off the hook completely.

In a performance evaluation of the contract in July 2010, a State Department employee wrote, "Significant concerns also arose regarding DynCorp's oversight of its own personnel in the field."

Those concerns were partly attributed to the base in Erbil.

"In northern Iraq," the evaluation continues, "lack of management oversight resulted in violations of the standards of conduct, which forced the Government to direct the removal of 11 personnel, including the DynCorp project manager [Boffo], from the contract."

By the evaluator's account, DynCorp failed in its duties, and it was recommended to end the company's contract. That didn't happen, of course, but according to Katie Kalahar, one of the Pope family's attorneys, DynCorp did lose out on an additional lucrative contract because of the incident.

"They were nixed," she says, adding that testimony will be later presented that supports the assertion.

A shifting account

In the days that followed Pope's death, stories circulated the DynCorp compound with all the drama and veracity of a high school cafeteria game of telephone. Predictably, they were not all consistent, but these had the important difference of coming from people in authority. Specifically, there was a rumor that Pope had killed himself.

Around March 13, according to the State Department's memo, DynCorp employee Jack Jordan had a conversation with a co-worker who made some "peculiar" remarks about Pope's death. Jordan asked the employee, "Are you under the impression that Justin Pope shot himself?"

The employee responded, "Based on the reports I've read, yes."

When Jordan spoke to a separate employee, Austin Stoffel, a memo included in the file continues, he was told DynCorp was beginning to investigate the incident "and it could be a suicide."

Jordan was surprised.

"Jordan stated that Palmer knows what happened that night," the memo says.

Stoffel replied: "Palmer drank two bottles of wine and a lot of beers and probably didn't remember much."

The apparent "suicide" theory appears elsewhere: In an email sent March 7, 2009 — two days after Pope died — by DynCorp program manager Pat Dobson to Boffo, Dobson wrote an insurance company seemed to be "fishing for a suicide verdict."

The truth, Dobson wrote, is "Justin got a case of the stupids and paid for it with his life." It's unclear what Dobson meant by his statement, or if he was suggesting Pope

accidentally shot himself.

Nevertheless, Boffo didn't address the remark in response but would later say in a sworn deposition that he understood within 24 hours of Pope's death that he knew it wasn't self-inflicted.

The inconsistencies made their way to Michigan, where DynCorp conveyed a number of jumbled storylines to the family in the hours following the incident, as *MT* previously reported.

Pope's wife, Ashley, received three calls within a span of several hours following the shooting from Dobson, each offering additional news. The first? Justin was in a serious "accident." Next, Justin was shot in the neck and was transferred to a hospital. Lastly, Justin was dead.

Soon after, Boffo's wife and his daughter (Palmer's fiance) arrived at the Popes' home in Commerce Township to visit Ashley. Ashley was traumatized to the point she had an emotional breakdown.

Michael Kehoe, DynCorp deputy project manager, then arrived. He initially told Ashley that Justin died alone in his room. He also asked another family member if Justin was depressed.

Immediately, the family doubted the implications that Pope either committed suicide or that there was an accident while Pope cleaned his gun.

Pope's brother, Kevin, told investigators he didn't believe the account because it didn't "sound like Justin." The family also said Justin had the utmost concern about gun safety.

"We all knew he was an expert with weapons, as many of those guys were," Bill Salsler told *MT*. "He even taught my wife how to shoot. He taught me all about the safety of it and how guns aren't dangerous but it's the people who don't know what they're doing with the gun. There was no question about — I didn't think that happened."

He continues, "Your mind, when someone dies, you don't know everything that happened but you start to think about all the things you know about that person. We knew that he was a happy person and loved coming home. Everyone answered no [when the initial account was offered], and that says it all."

Kehoe denies telling the family that Pope was alone when he died, court records show. He said in a deposition last year that he conveyed Pope's death "appeared to be self-inflicted" and that alcohol "appeared" to be involved.

Kehoe's own remarks under oath, however, appears to contradict a written statement he gave to DynCorp on the incident about six weeks after Pope's death.

Initially, according to the statement, Kehoe — who wasn't present at the time of the incident — was asked to fly to Michigan on March 5 to meet Pope's family. He wrote he believed Pope died of a gunshot wound to the mouth, and that "the only information I had was that Justin had accidentally shot himself."

That, even though Kehoe wrote he was in frequent contact with top DynCorp management in Iraq to be kept apprised of any updates. (In addition, at this point, the State Department had already conducted several interviews with Palmer and other witnesses in the room.)

So he flew to Michigan and told the family that Pope was alone when he died. The family didn't buy it.

When pressed, Kehoe assured them it was "absolutely accurate and correct," his April 2009 statement says, "and those were the facts that I had at the moment."

(Sovitsky, who was the team leader that oversaw Palmer and Pope, says a conversation with Kehoe about his trip in the days after he returned to Iraq rubbed him the wrong way. "He talked a lot about how attractive, how hot, Mrs. Pope was," he said in a deposition. "And he'd like to bang her, and that — and then talking about

how wasted he got while he was there.")

The story would dramatically change when Palmer arrived in the next couple of days.

In an interview with federal agents, Bill Salser recalled a conversation he had with Ashley, who said she spoke with Palmer a few days after Pope died.

"During this conversation [between Ashley and Palmer], Kyle stated that he was wrestling around with Justin, Kyle's finger was on the trigger, and Kyle shot Justin," the file says. "Kyle also told Ashley a third person was in the room at the time of the shooting."

DynCorp takes aim at Pope's family

DynCorp, of course, has through and through denied the family's accusations as "unequivocally false."

In court filings, attorneys representing the company lay out an argument that attempts to dispel any notion of a cover-up. It says the official story has been known to the family for years. And perhaps, the company says, not everything in Pope's family was as it seemed.

For example, Kehoe apparently came away from Michigan with a different impression of Pope's life. In his April 2009 written statement, he says: "I believe I am probably the only one who feels this way, but I feel [Pope] lived a reckless life, loved his son, but his relationships on the home front were rocky at best. I was not in the room that night, but it is my personal belief that although alcohol was a factor, Justin was reckless and it would have happened with or without alcohol."

The family's attorneys say those remarks are "another disturbing example" of victim blaming.

"It's a self-serving statement that was intended to redirect the focus of what really happened to blaming the victim and attacking the family," says Kalahar, the attorney.

Boffo highlighted an incident, included in the State Department report, alleging Pope was involved in a reckless accident near DynCorp's training facility in Virginia.

Pope, Flemming, and Palmer allegedly wrecked a car while drunk, left the vehicle, and attempted to cover up the situation before they walked back to the training site, according to Boffo. The incident was reported, and the trio was counseled and given additional daily duties, Boffo told the feds.

But Flemming's account shows Pope wasn't involved in the accident. It was only Flemming and Palmer.

"We went to Buffalo Wild Wings to get dinner, and on our way back, there was a deer," Palmer said in a deposition. "I swerved, hit some trees, wrecked my truck. I thought I was still in Virginia ... and in Virginia [in] a single-vehicle accident, if no one is hurt, you don't have to report it. So that's when we called Justin. He came and picked us up."

DynCorp also contends — despite the family's dismay of what attorneys described as "outrageous" and "insulting" observations — that Kehoe's remarks about Pope's life back home, the one filled with dysfunction and booze, weren't far off base.

"Beyond the fact that the statement of reference was not intended to be viewed by Plaintiffs, evidence has established that Mr. Kehoe's personal observations had merit," DynCorp's attorneys wrote, pointing to a Facebook conversation with Ashley Pope and Kyle Palmer's now ex-fiance, Natalie.

In the message, Ashley said the Salsers were "horrible people."

"Don't even know where to begin ... but they (Justin's parents) want Kyle to pay big-time," she wrote. "That's all I will say about that, and they're money hungry; it seems all they care about about. Like, [Patricia Salser's] a media whore ... and she told me

that I wasn't anything to Justin and I can replace him and she can't ... she's crazy."

Ashley then told Natalie: "maybe you should delete this ... I'm not really supposed to talk to anyone about it all."

The Pope's lawyers say Ashley was a woman in "great pain" and all families occasionally have problems. Furthermore, William Goodman notes, "Why is that license for DynCorp to lie about how their loved one was killed? How is it relevant that tension between in-laws can allow this corporation to avoid being held accountable for how they hurt his family?"

Regardless, their attorneys say Ashley and her son have a close relationship with the Salsers now.

DynCorp remains steadfast that the family acrimony and their claims have all been refuted. Kehoe wasn't sent to lie to the family, for instance.

"Mr. Kehoe was sent to Michigan to facilitate the return of Justin's body to Michigan for the funeral," DynCorp attorneys wrote. Kehoe paid over \$1,000 for the funeral out of his pocket, the brief says, and DynCorp fronted nearly \$10,000 to cover the costs.

Responding to the claim that DynCorp's accounts varied wildly throughout the weeks that followed Pope's death, the company's attorneys say in filings that Kehoe was initially relaying "preliminary information" and that he told the family he wouldn't have definitive answers until after the State Department investigation was complete.

Those statements, however, appear to conflict with Kehoe's written remarks in April 2009 that he gave the family "absolutely correct and accurate" facts.

What about the allegation that Kehoe implied that Pope committed suicide? It's a lie, contends DynCorp.

"The facts of this case reveal that no one ever told the Plaintiffs that Justin Pope committed suicide," DynCorp attorneys wrote in a brief in February.

But the rumor on the DynCorp compound that Pope killed himself seemingly carried more weight than the company's attorneys let on. A report filed in March 2010 by an investigator hired by DynCorp's insurance company suggests an unequivocal determination had been made that Pope shot himself.

"At first," the report states, "[Pope's] death was ruled a suicide."

In addition, DynCorp filed a document on Pope's death with the U.S. Department of Labor that's known as the "Employer's First Report of Injury or Occupational Illness."

The document filed in January 2010 — nine months after Pope died — asks for the employer to describe how the incident occurred. Dyncorp wrote:

"Pope accidentally discharged his weapon causing a round to strike him in the head."

'It doesn't go away'

If you ask one of DynCorp's own executives, there's only one chance to make a "death notification" to next of kin. And it should be executed masterfully.

In a deposition given last year, Michael Warren, vice president of DynCorp's employee assistance program in the human resources department, said: "Some people don't really realize how difficult making a death notification is and what it entails, because you only get one chance to ... make the death notification, and it has to be dignified ... if you provide information where you're — you're not 100 percent — I mean, that's just like saying someone died and they're not dead.

"I speak from experience. When you're letting someone know that someone — that their loved one has died — you've got to take into consideration that you're changing that person's life."

So when it comes to Pope's family, Hurwitz points to what's called "ambiguous grief," meaning the unresolved feelings that are generated when a loved one's cause of death is unknown.

"Justin's family will now never know the real truth about how he was killed because they don't know what they can and cannot believe," the family's attorneys wrote in a court brief, adding an expert witness would testify in the case "that the family remains trapped in the endless hell of not knowing, and many of them cannot even begin a normal grieving process because of it."

The family stews when asked to describe the feeling of being unable to cope with the loss of Pope.

"It affects everyone a little differently," says Justin's brother, Kevin. "Myself, I know a lot of people didn't sleep, but I'll go to bed every night and in my mind, I try to turn this off. Years went by and it affected my family life; it affected the way my daughters see me. I didn't sleep barely at all because I dreamed things about my brother being held down, held down by people and tortured. You just don't know. And it doesn't go away."

A spiritual anecdote relayed by Ashley Pope perhaps best illustrates the family's emotions.

When their son Gabriel was 8 years old, Ashley took him to visit his father's grave. There, she asked him, "Gabriel, are you mad at Jesus?"

"No, I'm not," Gabriel told his mom. "Jesus didn't kill my dad. Satan did."

The family's case is set to begin Nov. 30.

Ryan Felton is an investigative reporter for the Detroit Metro Times.



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