because there were not enough of the sets to go around...

The coroner examining his death concluded that Sgt Roberts had been sent into battle lacking "the most basic piece of equipment", and stated that it was "unforgivable and inexcusable" and represented a basic breach of trust that soldiers had in the government that they should be sent into combat zones without being properly-equipped (UK Independent).

Perhaps most disturbing has been the rising trend of mental health problems among Iraq veterans. By June 2005, military authorities had already been notified of 727 cases of troops with psychiatric disorders brought on by their service there i.e. an average of 60 each month, or 2 every day. The figure represented nearly 10% of the total British military presence in Iraq, and included 66 troops who developed such serious mental problems that they had to be airlifted home. The range of problems suffered by these men included post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, high levels of anxiety and excessive use of drink and drugs in order to cope with their problems. It was found that the rate of mental health problems was even higher among reservists, who were until recently deprived of the medical treatment available to regular soldiers.

Under the circumstances, one might wonder why the politicians who so blithely send these men into combat situations cannot bring themselves to provide them with the necessary protective equipment and support services to cope with what follows. The coroner in the Steven Roberts inquest asked the former Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, to appear before him, upon hearing how the minister had delayed approving a request for extra body armour kits for a two-week period - sadly, that equipment finally arrived in Iraq eight days too late to save Sgt Roberts!

There are legitimate concerns about the state of the armed forces. While levels of recruitment are holding up, around 9, 200 soldiers left the British army last year before their period of engagement was up, and the armed forces are currently estimated to be 5, 000 below desired strength. Given that even the remuneration provided to soldiers seems inadequate, that is hardly surprising. Indeed, on a recent visit to Afghanistan, Prime Minister Blair was confronted by one soldier serving there, who complained that he was paid only half of what a fireman in the UK earned.

It seems clear that for some politicians, life is cheap when it is someone else's whether soldier or civilian!

