

Scores of deaths in British barracks unaccounted for

Julie Hyland
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The death of a young trainee soldier at Catterick Garrison, north Yorkshire, has reopened concerns about Britain's army camps.

Andrew Browne, 24, was found dead from a gunshot wound in his dormitory on June 21. His was the 23rd non-combat death at the garrison, the largest in Europe, since 1993. These include seven soldiers found hanged and six found dead from gunshot wounds.

Police say that Browne died from a single gunshot and that "initial witness accounts indicate no other party appears to be directly involved". But relatives of other young soldiers who have died in non-combatant situations have argued that the latest fatality underscores their insistence that a full public inquiry must be held into conditions faced by young trainees in the British army.

Geoff Gray, whose son Geoff died three years ago at Deepcut barracks in Surrey, insisted that "there must be an inquiry into non-combat deaths in the British army.

"If this man committed suicide, there's a reason for it.

"If he didn't, we need to know why is it the government allows soldiers to kill our own men".

There have been 27 non-combat deaths at Deepcut barracks since 1990. Geoff Gray had joined the army in January 2001 on his seventeenth birthday. Just eight months later, whilst on guard duty at the Deepcut base, he was found dead with two bullet wounds to his head.

On a website established to uncover the truth about their son's death (<http://www.justice4ptegeoffgray.co.uk/>), Geoff's parents explain that shots were heard around the time their son went missing at 1.15 am on September 17, 2001.

Fully four sweeps of the area and the perimeter fence that Geoff had been patrolling were carried out, but he could not be found. On the fifth sweep of the same area, however, Geoff's body was discovered.

The army insisted that Geoff had committed suicide, a suggestion refuted by his parents, who say he was happy and had everything to live for. Both the civil police and the military police claimed there were no suspicious circumstances to their son's death, but a coroner's inquiry recorded an open verdict—finding that there was no evidence that Geoff had "indicated or in fact did take his own life".

"We are of the opinion that there is a cover up surrounding Geoff's death", his parents continued. "The facts that came out in the inquest prove that Geoff was shot twice in the head. There is evidence suggesting that his body was moved, then the intruder or

intruders [footsteps were heard running away from the fence] have waited over an hour to place Geoff's body where it could be found. We feel that the army has tried to make us believe some fairy tale where Geoff shot himself twice, hid for an hour, climbed over a fence a couple of times then laid down and died."

Six months later, James Collinson, also 17, was found dead with a gunshot wound in the same area. Collinson had been at Deepcut for just six weeks. Once again the army told his parents that he had committed suicide—a suggestion angrily denounced as a cover up by his parents.

Gray and Collinson were not the first to die from gunshot wounds whilst on sentry duty at the barracks. Six years before Gray's death, in 1995, army trainee Cheryl James, 17, was found dead from a gunshot wound to her head in the woods just outside the barracks.

Once again the army said James had committed suicide. An inquest also recorded an open verdict. Cheryl's parents, Doreen and Des, say that their daughter's death revealed widespread violence and sexual harassment at the barracks.

Des James has spoken of a "culture of quite sinister bullying" at the camp. Cheryl's friends have alleged that she had been forced to have sex with a corporal at the barracks.

Also in 1995, Sean Benton, 20, was found dead, this time with five gunshot wounds, which the army again claimed were self-inflicted. Sean's friend, Trevor Hunter, has said that the trainee had been subject to "vicious verbal attacks and humiliating abuse" because "his face didn't fit". Ballistic tests suggested that Sean had been shot four times from a distance, and only once from close range.

On each occasion internal investigations by the Royal Military Police's Special Investigation Branch classified the deaths as "intentional and self-inflicted". On no occasion did the army attempt to account for why such a relatively large number of young recruits at a single base should take their own lives. The inference was that they simply did not have what it takes.

Only sustained campaigning by the young victims' relatives forced further investigations into the Deepcut deaths—all of which have left many questions unanswered.

In December 2002, a BBC *Panorama* programme recorded interviews with soldiers describing physical attacks, bullying and sexual harassment at Deepcut. Confidential army records showed that there had been five attempted suicide bids at the barracks in 1995, the year James and Benton died.

Terri Lewis, a former lance corporal at the base, told *Panorama*: “The bullying at Deepcut was rife. Certain sergeants and corporals were just abusing the power,” she said, alleging that one in particular was “psychotic”.

Referring to Cheryl James, Lewis recalled, “There were many times she was crying on the block, talking to her friends. I was aware that a certain sergeant ... who I know only too well, took an extremely strong liking to Cheryl and made her life hell.”

“He made a sexual advance towards her. Obviously she did not respond to it, but it visibly and clearly shook the girl up. Not long after she took her life”.

Another soldier, Glynn Boswell, told the programme that incidences of bullying and harassment would fill “the Britannica volume. But you can’t report it. You could be reporting it to the person who was actually doing it”.

Trevor Hunter described how Benton had been singled out for special treatment: “He was thrown out of a second floor window to land on the grass below. He never ever told me who it was but he did say that an NCO [non commissioned officer] had done it”.

The existence of such widespread abuses does not in itself disprove suicide, but an independent forensic investigation the same year, commissioned by the Deepcut victims’ families, directly undermined the army’s claims that the deaths were self-inflicted.

Forensic scientist Frank Swann said that Sean Benton, Cheryl James and Geoff Gray could not have killed themselves. He concluded that James had been trying to push the gun away from her face when she was shot and that it was “physically impossible” for Benton’s and Gray’s wounds to have been self-inflicted.

His findings on the death of James Collinson were inconclusive, but a fresh post-mortem by scientists at Glasgow University who exhumed Collinson’s body found indentation marks around his right hand suggesting his rifle had been forced into his hands. Earlier tests also showed that his jaw had been fractured shortly before he died.

Even so, a fourth inquiry by Surrey police into the Deepcut deaths in 2003 concluded that there were no grounds for criminal prosecutions. The police report did state that their concerns over bullying at the barracks, which they had uncovered “incidentally”, were such that they would conduct a further, final investigation into non-combat deaths across the entire British army.

That fifth investigation was concluded in March this year. Its damning findings recorded that there had been 59 incidents of self-harm recorded at Deepcut between 1996 and 2001, with 24 in 1999 alone—a figure the army acknowledged may represent just half the total.

A “culture of bullying, self harm and suicide” had been able to take hold in the army, the report continued. But the police attributed this state of affairs to certain administrative failings on the part of the army—identifying as key areas of risk inadequate supervision, a failure to identify vulnerable people at the recruitment stage, and the practice of training new recruits with live ammunition.

Its findings were a whitewash, aimed at letting the government and the army off the hook. While calling for a “broader inquiry” into the extent on non-combat deaths in British military

establishments, and for the appointment of an independent commissioner to monitor army training, Surrey police again ruled out any prosecutions concerning the Deepcut fatalities.

In May the MoD again rejected the demands of the victims’ relatives for a public inquiry. This was not necessary it claimed because the Commons defence select committee is holding its own inquiry into Deepcut and the army’s training procedures in general. Moreover, the MoD has argued that a number of reforms introduced in the wake of the Deepcut deaths, including the appointment of an “empowered officer” to whom recruits can go for help and assistance, and the injection of an additional £23 million to improve training and welfare, would suffice.

But the climate of bullying and harassment in Britain’s military establishment that has been uncovered is not the result of administrative failings. It is intrinsic to the nature of the British army as an imperialist tool for occupation and subjugation.

Over the last months the world has seen the sickening images of US soldiers engaged in the torture of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison. And it has become clear that that this ritualised abuse was not the product of a few perverse minds amongst rank and file soldiers, but was authorised at the very highest levels as an integral part of US efforts to recolonise Iraq and ruthlessly suppress any opposition to its occupation.

It is also known that British soldiers have been involved in the abuse of prisoners. Four are currently facing court martial after photographs came to light depicting an Iraqi man, stripped to his waist and suspended from a rope attached to a forklift truck, driven by a laughing soldier. Other photographs depict Iraqi detainees forced into sexual acts.

The MoD has admitted that some 75 cases of civilian deaths, injuries and alleged ill-treatment of Iraqis by British soldiers are under investigation. At the High Court in London, lawyers representing twelve Iraqi families are seeking to bring charges against British armed forces for murdering their relatives in separate instances.

The launching of predatory wars of colonial conquest and enslavement requires that those who are to be sent to fight them are first conditioned to both accept and be prepared to inflict pain and suffering, in order to deaden any empathy they might otherwise feel for their victims.



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