

Britain: government rejects public inquiry into brutality at Deepcut barracks

Robert Stevens
3 December 2004

On November 30, Britain's Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram announced to the House of Commons that the government would not organise a public inquiry into further allegations of abuse at Deepcut army barracks in Surrey. Instead, Ingram said that a "fully independent figure" would be appointed to lead a review.

The announcement came one day after the leaking of a report of an ongoing four-year investigation into Deepcut being conducted by the Surrey police force that began following the deaths of four recruits at the camp between 1995 and 2002.

The Army has stated that they believe the recruits all committed suicide, but their families have consistently demanded a public inquiry.

The Surrey police report contains allegations of ritual humiliation, bullying and sexual abuse including rape.

Ingram was dismissive in his response, stating that he did not believe that a "culture of fear and violence" existed at Deepcut and that, of 173 allegations cited in the new police report, Surrey police were only investigating the rape allegation.

He added, "This document does not contain evidence. It contains some allegations which have already been investigated, and other allegations which are worthy of investigations, but have not yet been tested."

Some of the anonymous allegations, he said, were "hearsay," and many of the details contained within the report it were "sparse." He went on to praise the barracks, stating that it was a professional training centre that had seen some 1,200 recruits graduate during the period investigated and was "not a broken machine."

Ingram was satisfied that all that can be done was being done. It was only necessary for this to be seen to be done. But this will not happen. The "fully independent figure" would look again at four previous investigations of the Surrey training camp, but this would not be allowed to "prejudice" current investigations and may not even cover some of the four suspicious deaths at the camp.

There was no promise that the inquiry would even sit in

public or have the power to demand documents and summon witnesses.

The hostile response of the government to the report is in proportion to the devastating picture it paints of the regime at Deepcut. The initial contents of the Surrey police report were made public after being uncovered by the documentary programme "Dispatches: Barrack Room Bullies" (broadcast on Channel 4 on December 1).

The information was also the subject of an article this week in the *London Evening Standard* by journalist Andrew Gilligan, who led the "Dispatches" investigation. In it, a female private recalled how she was "made to run around the parade ground naked whilst wearing a belt with mess tins attached to it."

A further article appeared in the *London Evening Standard* on December 1, in which more Deepcut recruits came forward to speak about their time at the camp.

One of the trainees, known as "Ian," was at the camp between July and November 1995 and had made one of the allegations in the Surrey police report. Ian described to police how a drunken Deepcut instructor lined up naked recruits and threw darts at them until three had lodged in their stomachs. He said that this abuse had happened on more than one occasion:

"We weren't allowed back to bed until three darts had lodged in our stomachs. The senior NCO would come back from town completely drunk and decide to pick on someone. You would just go back to bed and put some antiseptic on. You didn't want to make a complaint at Deepcut."

He saw many incidents, but cited one in particular: "I saw women being taken aside and told to go up to the sergeant's room to 'help' him. Once they were in there we knew exactly what was going to happen. Once a group of us stayed outside the door and we heard shouting and screaming from inside. We ended up knocking on the door to rescue them. It was just a show of force to say, 'you will not mess with us.' " But some people were targeted "because they broke down more easily."

Further allegations include a trainee who recounts that he

or she was thrown out of a second-floor window.

Another trainee from 1995, Joanna Jones, said, “There was a climate of fear. Staff made our lives impossible and the officers stood back and did nothing.” She recalls that she saw “humiliation and control through the use of fear.” She has now organised a campaign called “Deepcut Reunited” to gather testimony from victims and witnesses. Jones was at Deepcut at the same time as Cheryl James, one of the soldiers who died. She recalls that James was “under a lot of pressure.”

Despite the four deaths, constant allegations and rumours of horrific abuse at Deepcut, until this year no one had been called to book, let alone prosecuted. On October 22, a former training instructor, Leslie Skinner, was jailed for four-and-a-half years for sexual attacks on young male soldiers. Skinner admitted five indecent assaults between 1992 and 1997 on four male soldiers.

Skinner had engaged in systematic sexual abuse of the young men. Three of Skinner’s victims were aged between 17 and 21. He also abused a fourth victim at Arnhem Barracks in Aldershot. Skinner kept canes and a riding crop in his locker, which he used on his victims.

Before being sent to Deepcut by the Army, he had his rank reduced to that of Private after being convicted by a court martial for indecently exposing himself in a car park in Lisburn, Northern Ireland. At his trial, Judge Charles Tilling told Skinner, “For some reason best known to itself the Army then placed you in a position where you were in contact with and had influence over young recruits.”

Skinner had been due to stand trial at Kingston Crown Court in September, where he had been charged with nine cases of indecent assault and one of male rape. But he changed his plea and admitted five counts of indecent assault, with the outstanding charges quashed by the judge at his eventual trial. Following the incidents for which he was sentenced, he had been court-martialed for a further indecent assault. He was jailed for six months following this offence and then discharged from the Army.

The parents of the dead trainees have also faced an extraordinary display of hostility from the government. The mother and father of Private Geoff Gray and two other Deepcut families—Des and Doreen James, parents of Cheryl James, and James and Yvonne Collinson, parents of Private James Collinson—gave evidence to the parliamentary Defence Select Committee on December 1, set up to investigate the armed forces duty of care towards young recruits.

During his testimony, Geoff Gray senior called for Deepcut’s two commanding officers during the past years to be brought before the committee. Noting the conviction of Skinner, he said, “There was a total lack of duty of care as

far as I’m concerned.... You don’t put a sexual predator in a camp full of 16, 17 and 18 year old boys and expect everything to be rosy.

“This committee is looking at duty of care. If they are getting evidence from the families you should hear from the commanding officers as well.”

In response, the committee chairman and Labour MP Bruce George threatened, “If it was any other group criticising us about our methodology I would have them thrown out.

“At a time when there are very, very many serious issues that this committee should be addressing, we are taking half of our time or more in worrying and agonising and being distressed about what happened to your kids.... Frankly I feel we are doing more than anyone could have expected us to do.”

The families have submitted a formal request for former commander Lieutenant Colonel Nigel Barrie-Josling and the current commander Lieutenant Colonel Ron Laden to be questioned.

The regime at Deepcut is not an aberration, as is indicated by the fact that the allegations go back more than 10 years and the command of two officers. On June 21 of this year, Andrew Browne, 24, was found dead from a gunshot wound in his dormitory at Catterick Garrison, north Yorkshire. 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.

That such deaths and atrocities have continued at Deepcut and other garrisons, even after the media spotlight has fallen on them, demonstrates that brutalisation and humiliation is an integral part of a “training” regime during which young men and women are groomed to carry out repression on behalf of British imperialism all over the world.

In announcing the review, Ingram said, “An army career has never been, and never will be, a soft option, but violence and intimidation are not the means by which the army produces the soldiers it needs.”

What Deepcut reveals is that it is precisely through “violence and intimidation” that the army produces the soldiers “it needs”. By such measures, soldiers are taught to unquestionably follow orders, to witness extraordinary brutality, and through this to become inured to the suffering of others and made ready to inflict such suffering when called upon to do so.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact