

# Still no truth after year-long inquiry into British Army trainee deaths

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The yearlong “Duty of Care” inquiry by the House of Commons Defence Committee announced its 191-page findings on March 14.

The inquiry was established in March 2004 in response to the non-combat deaths of four trainee soldiers that occurred at the British Army’s Deepcut Barracks in Surrey, England, between 1995 and 2002.

The deaths of Privates Cheryl James, 18, Sean Benton, 20, Geoff Gray, 17, and James Collinson, 17, in separate incidents have never been adequately explained. Army claims that the four committed suicide have been rejected by their families, who have campaigned for a public inquiry into army training practices.

Allegations that the army is involved in a cover-up are illustrated in the case of James Collinson, who died on March 23, 2002. The official explanation that he may have taken his own life is in stark contrast with his actions before his death. Collinson had recently passed his driving test and was making plans to buy his first car. He was also planning to return home to celebrate his sister’s birthday the week he died.

Amnesty International had taken up the four soldiers’ deaths. In September 2003, it published an article entitled, “A conspiracy of silence—AI joins the families of young soldiers killed in UK Army barracks to demand answers about their deaths.”

A four-year investigation by the Surrey police force into the deaths at Deepcut uncovered 173 allegations of ritual humiliation, bullying and sexual abuse including rape. These are just the abuses that were reported, and are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg. In the seven-year period covering the four deaths at Deepcut, some 12,000 recruits passed through the training regime there.

In addition, there have been unexplained non-combat deaths at other training establishments and countless more allegations of mistreatment and brutality. Amnesty International states that there have been a total of 1,748 “non-natural” deaths in UK army barracks since 1990, including almost 200 gun-related deaths.

It was to forestall growing demands for a public inquiry that the government announced in November 2004 that a “fully independent figure” would be appointed to lead a review of

events at Deepcut, under the auspices of Nicolas Blake QC. Expected to report sometime in summer 2005, Blake said that he would look into the “wider circumstances” of the deaths. However, he has no statutory powers to compel anyone to participate and no power to force any party to implement his recommendations.

The Defence Committee’s investigation was strictly limited to the Armed Forces’ “duty of care” towards its recruits. Committee chair Labour MP Bruce George said at the outset, “We will not be questioning the findings of the police or of the coroner about how specific deaths occurred.”

The committee also agreed not to question the two former commanders at Deepcut, Lieutenant Colonel Nigel Barrie-Josling and the current commander Lieutenant Colonel Ron Laden. The families of the Deepcut victims had submitted a formal request for such a questioning, but this was vetoed on the grounds that it would interfere with the Blake investigation.

Similarly, the committee ruled out the need for a public inquiry into the Deepcut deaths, arguing, “Unless the Blake review unearths significant new evidence, there are no grounds to believe that a public inquiry could add substantially to the investigations that have already taken place.”

Such is the scale of disquiet, however, that the committee has recommended the formation of an “independent military complaints commission” that would investigate abuse claims and have retrospective powers. The report states: “It would be for the commission itself to decide whether to undertake an investigation, but we would expect it to take into account the seriousness of the allegation.”

The objective of the committee’s report is to restore confidence in the British army at a time when the ruling elite has openly embarked on a revival of militarism and neo-colonialism.

Whilst the report goes to great lengths towards this end, insofar as it details some of the practices employed in the armed forces, it paints a graphic picture of a brutal regime. Moreover, media coverage of the report hardly acknowledged its most damning aspect—namely, the information it provides on the social background of recruits, and the British army’s recruitment of under-18-year-olds.

The report notes that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) does not

collect data on the backgrounds of its recruits. But it states: “However, MoD did provide us with the results of a survey relating to Army recruits from the Cardiff area between 1998 and 2000. That study found that the majority of recruits came from a ‘broken home’ or ‘deprived background’ and had left school with no qualifications.” The survey found that that 40 percent of respondents had joined the Army as a last resort.

The report also cites a paper from a Lieutenant Colonel Strutt, which focused on “bullying and culture shock in the Infantry” and found that 32 percent of recruits come from poor housing conditions and 45 percent come from “broken homes.”

The Defence Committee stated that it received testimony from Professor Simon Wessely, director at Kings’ Centre for Military Health Research and Professor of Psychiatry, King’s College London.

Wessely told the committee that there are some members of the Armed Forces who “are quite clearly risky” and may come from “somewhat dubious backgrounds.” He added, “I know that is not the purpose of the Army, but it is a side effect of the Army; it does address a socially excluded group which very few other people can tackle.”

Statistics on reading abilities cited in the committee confirm that the army tends to recruit overwhelmingly from the poorest and most disadvantaged layers of young people. The committee took evidence from Rear Admiral Goodall, who said that “the Army in particular...has a significant problem with basic skills provision.”

Goodall told the committee that “ ‘very few’ applicants had a reading age of seven, but those with a reading age of 11 were not uncommon.” MoD figures cited in this section reveal that 50 percent of all recruits entering the army have literacy or numeracy skills at levels on or below Entry Level Three—the equivalent reading ability expected of an 11-year-old. According to the report, it was not until April 2004 “that applicants with the equivalent of a reading age of a five-year-old have been rejected.”

An example of the consequences of such a regime given in the report is that of a dyslexic soldier who had been Absent without Leave. The soldier was given just one hour to read a booklet on his rights prior to his court martial. The Defence Committee merely advises: “Forces should be aware of the difficulties some of their personnel may have in assimilating that material.”

Nonetheless, the committee commended the army’s “highly trained, capable and successful service personnel,” concurring favourably with Professor Wessely’s remarks that “they [soldiers] are not like middle-aged academics or Maudsley social workers. They are somewhat tough people and they are to do a difficult job of fighting, not emoting. Part of that is that they learn to repress emotions and fear.”

This stress on repressing “emotions and fear” runs like a red thread through the armed forces training system. A section of the report discusses the issue of whether it would be advisable

to screen recruits for psychological vulnerabilities when they apply to join up.

Wessely’s testimony was also cited approvingly when he stated that “screening for vulnerability to natural disorders is ineffective and counter-productive,” as it would lead to recruits being “stigmatized.” Tellingly, he told the committee that if the Army took a simple risk factor of vulnerability, such as coming from a broken home, “that would eliminate nearly the entire Army.”

Similar calculations on the army’s ability to maintain its numbers account for the committee’s failure to make the most obvious demand in relation to “duty of care”—a ban on the recruitment of under-18s. Instead, it recommends that the MoD merely “examine the potential impact of raising the recruitment age for all three Services to 18.”

The reasons for its hesitation are not hard to find. The committee reports that as of April 2004, 6,690 members of the armed forces were less than 18 years of age, representing 3.2 percent of all personnel. Of these, 1,640 were aged 16 and 5,050 aged 17. In 2004, a total of 9,515 teenagers joined the army and 3,225 (more than 30 percent) of these were just 16 years old.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers produced its “Child Soldiers Global Report” in 2004.

Its overview on Europe stated: “Alone among European governments which had ratified the Optional Protocol, the UK and Serbia and Montenegro permitted recruits to enlist at 16, although in Ireland 16-year-old volunteers could sign up for apprenticeships to the armed forces. Up to 7,000 under-18s were serving in the UK armed forces in any given year. Underage recruits could sign up for 22-year contracts, with an option to leave after four years from the age of 18. The youngest recruits could therefore find themselves contractually bound to serve until they were at least 22. The UK reserved the right to deploy under-18s in hostilities in urgent situations.”



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