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The case of Private James Collinson

Upon leaving school at the age of 16, James Collinson -- from Perth in Scotland -- sat the entrance exams to join the UK Army. At the age of 10, he had announced his desire to become a soldier to his parents. At the age of 12, James Collinson joined the local army cadet force. By September 2001, Pte James Collinson had joined the UK Army and had spent 18 weeks in training. In January 2002, he was posted to Deepcut Barracks for his second phase of training.

On the night of 23 March 2002, after being sent out on patrol duties, Pte James Collinson was found dead, with a single gunshot wound to the head. He was only 17 years old when he died and had been at Deepcut Barracks for just six weeks.

The family of Pte James Collinson told Amnesty International that that night at Deepcut a wedding reception was underway, and that he had been charged with checking vehicles against a list of invited guests. More importantly, Pte James Collinson had gone out on guard duty unarmed. At the age of 17 years and three months, he would have been too young to be armed without the supervision of an Officer. As stated to the organization by the family of Pte James Collinson, Deepcut Barracks have a policy according to which no recruit under the age of 17 years and six months can carry weapons on guard duty. As a result, that night Pte James Collinson was armed only with a fluorescent vest and a torch. However when his lifeless body was discovered, he had an SA80 rifle across his chest. The next day the family was told that Pte James Collinson had borrowed the gun from one of his young colleagues and this was the weapon that had apparently been found on him.

With respect to this, the family of Pte James Collinson asked an Officer from the Royal Military Police's Special Investigation Branch (SIB) how it would have been possible for a recruit to have access to a lethal weapon for which he did not have authorization. As stated to Amnesty International, the reply they got was "we don't know what these young lads get up to out there on their own". The family refuses to accept such an answer, and wished it "had known about this lack of supervision at an earlier date before it was too late".

A coroner's inquest into Pte James Collinson's death has not been held yet, thus an official cause of death has yet to be recorded. However, a second post-mortem examination, carried out on Pte James Collinson's body in late 2002 by forensic pathologists from Glasgow University in Scotland, reportedly found evidence that his rifle had been placed in his hand after he had died. This evidence includes the presence of indentation marks on his right hand which, given the absence of bruising, would appear to be consistent with his SA-80 rifle being forcibly pressed into his hand some time after his death, and evidence indicating that Pte James Collinson had sustained a jaw fracture shortly before dying. The

latter added to speculation that Pte James Collinson was involved in a violent struggle immediately prior to his death. The original post-mortem examination had not detected this fracture and it has been reported that it could have been sustained at the time of death due to the trauma to Pte James Collinson's head caused by the bullet wound. However, the family of Pte James Collinson has been advised by their own ballistic expert that such an explanation would be unlikely in his opinion.

Almost immediately after his death, the UK Army implied that Pte James Collinson had committed suicide, a theory that his family, friends, teachers and those who worked with him are said to dispute. The family is in possession of the report compiled following the original post-mortem examination on Pte James Collinson's body. They told Amnesty International that the report indicates that both Surrey Police and the SIB were satisfied that no other person was involved in Pte James Collinson's death. The report is dated 26 March 2002, that is merely three days after Pte James Collinson's death.

The family of Pte James Collinson has expressed concern to Amnesty International that his death had not actually been investigated until the investigation into the death of Pte Geoff Gray was reopened (see below). Surrey Police appear to be reluctant to admit to this. However, the family insists that the police investigation into Pte James Collinson's death appears to have been non-existent in the first few weeks. Yvonne Collinson, Pte James Collinson's mother, told Amnesty International that three weeks after her son's death, she finally managed to find a Surrey Police officer who had knowledge of his death and eventually persuaded him to go to see her and take a statement from her. Since she and her son had been together just before his death, she feels very strongly that her opinion as to her son's state of mind would be relevant to the police's investigation. Thus, she told Amnesty International of her dismay upon realizing that she had many more questions to ask of the police than they had to ask of her. In a statement to the organization she said: "I felt I was being brushed aside as an irate mother who wouldn't accept her son's apparent suicide".

His family believes that the UK Army has tried to cover up the circumstances surrounding his death. They consider the idea that Pte James Collinson may have taken his own life to be in stark contrast with their knowing -- among other things -- that he had been making plans to purchase his first car as a result of having recently passed his driving test, and with him having told them that he intended to return to the family home for the Easter weekend to celebrate his sister's birthday.

In April 2002, in a statement before the UK Parliament in response to a parliamentary question, the UK MoD confirmed that Pte James Collinson had died from a gunshot wound to the head while on guard duty at Deepcut Barracks. It also stated that a police investigation into the circumstances of his death was ongoing, thereby making it inappropriate to comment any further, and that once the inquest had been held an Army Board of Inquiry into Pte James Collinson's death would be convened. See statement made by Dr. Lewis Moonie on behalf of the UK Ministry of Defence to the UK Parliament in response to a parliamentary question on 22 April 2002 and available online at <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200102/cmhansrd/vo020422/text/20422w02.htm>. It is Amnesty International's understanding that such an inquiry would be of an internal nature, that is, exclusive to the UK Army.

Public Document

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