



*Those who can, do.  
Those who can't, bully.*

Bully OnLine is the web site of the UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line and is funded by sales of books from Success Unlimited

## **Bullying, harassment and suicide in the military armed services** **Bullying in the army, bullying in the navy, bullying in the royal air force** **Army bullying, military bullying**

100 years ago it was considered vainglorious to die for your country but today people are more likely to be focused on the employer's Duty of Care under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974). The reality is today's Army Soldier, in their attempt to be the best, is 15 times more likely to die in their barracks than in combat.

The recent spate of suicides and suspicious deaths at [Deepcut Army Barracks](#) in Surrey, England, suggests that the army in the UK seems to have a lax attitude to death of personnel in service. By contrast the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force don't seem to have a suicide problem amongst recruits - at least not at anywhere near the same levels.

In June 1995 Private Sean Benton, from Hastings, East Sussex, was found dead at the Deepcut Princess Royal Barracks. He had five bullet wounds to his chest. Ballistics tests suggested that only one bullet was fired from close range and the others from a distance, but the Army claimed he had committed suicide.

In November 1995 Private Cheryl James, 18, of Llangollen, Gwent, was found dead with a single bullet wound to the head at the barracks which is the headquarters of the Royal Logistical Corps. The coroner recorded an open verdict but an Army inquiry concluded she had committed suicide. Surrey Police said they were not looking for anyone else in connection with the Private James' death

In September 2001 Private Geoff Gray, 17, from Hackney, east London, was found dead with two gunshot wounds to his head while on guard duty. A coroner recorded an open verdict after hearing from witnesses that during a search after the shots were fired a figure was seen running away. In total five shots were fired; three bullets have not been found. His parents have a [web site](#) devoted to discovering the truth about his death.

On 23 March, Private James Collinson, 17, from Perth, was found dead with a single gunshot wound while on guard duty at the Deepcut barracks. The Army said he shot himself, but his parents do not accept this, insisting he had been happy. As of November 2002 no inquest has been held.

Despite army denials, a [leaked report](#) reveals a culture of bullying, harassment, rape, racism and beatings at Deepcut Army Barracks. In October 2004, former Deepcut Army barracks training instructor [Leslie Skinner](#) was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in jail for sex attacks on young male soldiers.

There's a world of difference between shouting abuse and shouting encouragement. Bullies disingenuously confuse the two in order to abdicate responsibility for their abuse. Abuse reveals itself by patterns. At Deepcut there's a pattern of four suspicious deaths, and another at [Abingdon in Oxfordshire](#) in October 2002. There have also been suspicious deaths at Catterick in North Yorkshire.

In a civilian workplace people can stand up to verbal abuse, get their union involved, if necessary a solicitor, and claim constructive dismissal for the employer's repudiatory conduct. In the army, recruits are subject to military discipline and therefore none of these options are available. Service personnel are socially and geographically isolated and this means they don't have contact with sources of information, advice and support that civilian's workers do. No personal space, no permanent home, living in barracks, no privacy, no social contact, and no PC with Internet access. Even access to a phone may be difficult.

Life in the military means living in a closed community, no access to independent investigators or to the media for undercover filming.

Service personnel are often unable to leave the base and as such are, to all intents and purposes, a prisoner of their circumstances. Inexperienced, isolated, vulnerable young people in a captive environment with a hierarchy of military discipline, and the threat of the Official Secrets Act provides the ideal breeding ground for a culture of abuse.

There's no doubt that the UK has a professional army that is highly regarded throughout the world. However, there is a dark side and the army has a poor record of death in service and an uneasy attitude to psychiatric injury and [PTSD](#). More veterans of the Falklands war have since committed suicide than were killed in the battle itself. In WW1, [306 soldiers were executed](#) on the orders of General Haig (known at the time as Butcher Haig) for the sole purpose of instilling fear in the remaining soldiers. It's not recognised that most, and maybe all, the selected soldiers, many of them teenagers, were exhibiting the symptoms of PTSD. Today, General Haig would be regarded as a war criminal but he retains his earldom whilst the families who lost a loved one still bear the shame of false accusations of cowardice and desertion. The Army, and the UK government, continue to refuse to issue posthumous pardons, presumably because they fear legal action, compensation claims, and closer inspection of unpalatable matters such as continuing deaths in non-combat situations.

Bullying in the Armed Forces is not restricted to new recruits and junior ranks. A growing number of allegations have been made by older service personnel that they're being hounded out of their jobs before normal retirement age so that the Ministry of Defence can save on pension costs. For every soldier forced to leave after giving 12 years loyal service, a saving of one million pound in pension payments for every four soldiers discharged this way can be made. [\[More\]](#)

Whenever an Army spokesman is interviewed there are strenuous denials of bullying, or heavy emphasis on "policy". However a policy is only words on paper, it needs a commitment from those in authority to make it work. Four suspicious deaths and another recently at a barracks in Abingdon (and more elsewhere) are evidence that the Army's fine words are at odds with reality.

The Armed Forces also offer careers to people in a non-combatant role such as engineer, driver, cook etc. These people are then subject to the same brutal disciplinarian regime as their combatant colleagues. One should not be surprised that problems arise. In October 2002, chef Alison Croft, 22, [hung herself](#) from a wardrobe door at Dalton barracks in Abingdon, Oxfordshire.