

**Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
References Committee**

SUBMISSION COVER SHEET

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SENATE COMMITTEE: EFFECTIVENESS OF AUSTRALIA'S MILITARY JUSTICE SYSTEM - TERM OF REFERENCE: (1)(B)(ii)

I wish to make a submission to the Senate inquiry concerning the ADF's handling of trainees and former personnel.

My son Scott will not appear in the official statistics of soldiers who have committed suicide whilst a member of the ADF because he survived his suicide attempt. However, it does not make it any less real than those who tried and succeeded.

October 2002 Scott, then 20 years old, joined the army and was sent to Kapooka to undertake his basic training.

After a fortnight at the base he sustained an injury to his back and knee whilst lifting a heavy object, this made marching and other tasks extremely painful. At first he was directed to ignore the pain and 'suck it in' and was not allowed to miss training even though he could barely walk, much less march. Finally it became impossible to cope with and he was sent to the Digger James Rehabilitation Unit (DJ's).

When he was sent there his comment was that he had been sent to join the 'window lickers'. From the start he was unhappy at the stigma attached to being in the unit, as during their induction there were many references to people who were sent to DJ's being 'weak' and useless. When recruits marched past the DJ building they were given the 'eyes right' command and told to observe the 'window lickers' and other such derogatory remarks.

Friday,
15 November 02 He was there for two weeks, during which time he became quite anxious about his future with the ADF after sustaining an injury, and the humiliation attached to having been placed in the unit.

Due to the content of his phone calls, I was concerned about his psychological state and I flew from Perth, WA and drove for five hours from Melbourne to Wagga Wagga to visit him on the Saturday to gauge the seriousness of his concerns.

Whilst trainees are not allowed out of lines during training, he told me that he would be allowed out on the Saturday as he was in the Digger James unit, but having arrived at the gate I received a text message from him to say that all leave for Digger James' personnel had been cancelled.

I replied that I had come a long way to see him and would not be leaving without doing so. When he advised senior personnel that on the basis of him believing he had leave on Saturday, I had come from Perth to visit him, they humiliated in front of other soldiers because 'mummy had come'. It was made clear that he was getting favourable treatment in being allowed leave and the others were not.

He was anxious about the time all day, unable to relax. He insisted that he return an hour early rather than risk the consequences of being a minute late.

I saw him for the day and heard stories of the treatment at Kapooka, mostly centering on the fact that the response to everything, including soldiers who sought elastoplasts for bleeding, infected blisters on their feet was to "fucking toughen up", "harden the fuck up" or "dry your eyes princess", "build a bridge – get over it", and being repeatedly told "you're weak". He was in pain with his back injury which had not received any specific treatment. I arranged for him to attend a sports physiotherapist that day for massage treatment which assisted him.

There were stories of being alienated due to being in the Digger James Unit (DJ's) – because this represented weakness of the worst possible kind – a message which was indoctrinated from day one.

- 21 November 02 Text message received from Scott:
"I'm just feeling like its all too much and I want to curl up in a ball and cry"
- Nov 02 Having been in DJ's for two weeks, he could not rejoin his original platoon, but was back-squadded and had to start his training again from scratch, so he ended up being at Kapooka for a total of 13 weeks (including Christmas and New Year) instead of 6 weeks.
- During his second period of training at Kapooka he met Pte Jeremy Williams, they became good friends. Scott credits Jeremy with getting him through training by with his sense of humour and encouragement.
- January 2003 Following Kapooka he was posted to Latchford Barracks, at Bonegilla in Victoria. There he trained as a parachute rigger. During his time at Latchford he became increasingly depressed and I received numerous disturbing phone calls about his situation.
- 2 February 03 In February he rang to tell me that his friend Jeremy Williams had committed suicide by hanging himself at Singleton Barracks. Scott went to the base counsellor to talk about how he felt. He was allowed weekend leave to return to Perth for Jeremy's military funeral. He spent a lot of time with Mr and Mrs Williams, telling them what he knew of their son and how supportive Jeremy had been for him at Kapooka.
- After ground training at Latchford Scott was transferred to Nowra in NSW. This was for the actual parachuting phase of his training. He loved the opportunity to parachute and had no difficulty in jumping out of planes into the ocean at night, or with heavy packs, that was the fun part of the job.

But the atmosphere at Nowra was making him increasingly depressed and I became extremely concerned for his welfare. The culture at Nowra was one of heavy drinking and smoking and if you didn't fit the mould you were an outsider – and humiliated accordingly.

Scott had never smoked and rarely drank prior to joining the army. He now does both.

May/June 03 In May and June all his phone calls were about how he could get of the army and how desperately unhappy he was. I recommended he speak to the base psychologist/counsellor, but apparently there wasn't one available at Nowra.

20 May 03 Text message from Scott:
"Hey mum, I don't know if I can do this anymore, I hate everyday, I'm just soft, weak and useless"

26 June 03 He returned to Latchford on about 26 June 2003, and immediately sought an appointment with the counsellor, this was arranged for Monday, 30 June.

27 June 03 Text message from Scott:
"Love U2 xox - that's the only thing stopping me from topping myself. I'm just so sick of everything being shit. I just want out. Sorry for scaring u. I luv u xox"

30 June 03 I received a phone call from Scott at about 8.30am on Monday, 30 June 2003 which I assumed would be to wish me happy birthday. However, the call was to tell me that he had been placed under 24-hour suicide watch and was to be transferred to a hospital off-base.

I caught the evening flight from Perth and arrived in Albury the next day and stayed with him for a week.

When Scott was in hospital he was visited by an army friend who was only 18 yrs old, the boy told Scott that he was brave because he had the guts to try suicide – the boy wanted to, but couldn't.

Scott's and my understanding when I left Albury to return to Perth was that when Scott was well enough, he would be discharged from the private hospital back to the army hospital where his paperwork would be processed in a day and then he would be put on a plane back to Perth.

28 July 03 After four weeks in Albury Hospital, Scott was transferred back to the base hospital on 28th of July.

Immediately he received conflicting advice about when he would be sent back to Perth, and for the next few days I received text messages and phone calls from him expressing how anxious he was. The advice about his return home varied from days to weeks, to months. I kept offering to intervene and speak to someone in authority, but Scott resisted this offer. I phoned his mobile twice a day to speak to him since I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was becoming desperate.

- 28 July 03 Text message from Scott:
*"I'm back 2mns and they're already f***ing me around. They say it might take a month for my discharge 2B through. I might B here a few weeks. I'll find out soonish."*
- 31 July 03 At 10.30pm (Perth time) on Thursday, 31 July 2003, I received a call from the base duty officer to tell me that Scott was in the emergency department of Albury Hospital, having collapsed.
- I asked if it was a suicide attempt. The officer could not say, so I asked if Scott was conscious and if I could speak to him. Scott was not too coherent, but I said I loved him and asked if he had taken anything, he said "I'm sorry mum, I took about 80 tablets". I asked him to give the phone to the doctor, and then checked that the doctor was aware he had taken an overdose and was treating him accordingly.
- I again caught the midnight flight to Sydney then a morning flight to Albury. I was met at the airport by two army officers who drove me to the hospital. I saw Scott for a short while at the emergency department and he was then transferred back to Albury Private Hospital's psychiatric wing where he stayed until 14th August. This time I stayed in Albury, insisting that I would not leave until I could accompany him home on the plane.
- 14 August 03 Scott was allowed to leave Albury Hospital on the basis that I accompany him to Perth and take him straight to Hollywood Hospital Private Clinic – another psychiatric unit. Scott remained there for about a fortnight. Once discharged he remained under the care of a psychiatrist from the hospital.
- Scott's demeanour once home from hospital did not improve, he was anxious, had panic attacks and could not socialise with his family or friends. He would call out in his sleep "you're weak – toughen the f**k up", and other such phrases that he had become accustomed to. His whole thought process had been retrained to believe that he had failed because he was weak.
- October 03 Although on anti-depressant medication he came close to a second suicide attempt in October. He left the house late at night with enough tablets with which to overdose. Fortunately his sister and I went out to look for him and found him in time.
- For a parent to go to bed at night, and have to listen-out for their son leaving the house, in case he would self-harm, is as you can imagine, extremely stressful, but necessary.
- 9 January 04 He was discharged from the army on 9 January 2004. Until that time he had to check-in weekly with a military base in Fremantle, and was restricted in his movements and pursuits. However, the army continued to pay him and cover his medical expenses.
- 10 Jan 04 onwards From the time of his discharge the ADF have ceased to pay for his medical expenses. (Despite assurances given to me by the senior officers at Albury that the army would continue to cover medical costs related to his condition for as long as necessary).

His fortnightly visits to his psychiatrist cost him \$150 a time, added to the cost of the various medications prescribed for him.

The psychiatrist's recommendation is that he should not work for six months due to the effects of stress on his mental well being.

However, because he was judicious with his money during his time in the army and saved a lot of his pay, he does not qualify for any CentreLink payments. This leaves him in a catch-22 position of relying on his savings to pay medical and living expenses whilst precluded from seeking work.

I cannot give you chapter and verse about what went on at Kapooka, Latchford or Nowra, since every story I have is obviously second hand. However, the stories I heard over the last year have left me very worried about the way the services treat their recruits. Particularly the young recruits who have no experience of the world and are most vulnerable. I understand that whilst Scott was at Kapooka two recruits tried to run away one night. They were brought back by the Military Police, and placed under guard. One of the recruits tried to suicide that night, and was later escorted back home under guard.

I would like to be able to provide you with names, dates and details, but I cannot, my son will no longer speak about what went happened to him, and now believes that it was his fault he didn't make it, because he was weak. His graduation report shows this is not the case, he was a good soldier, and certainly didn't lack courage.

I know he was interviewed as part of the inquiry into Jeremy Williams' death and you will undoubtedly be able to read his testimony from there. However, that was only answering specific questions asked by a senior officer, and Scott was understandably nervous about repercussions if he spoke out.

I accept that the army have a difficult job to do and that all personnel must be able to obey orders immediately, without question or hesitation, particularly in hostile circumstances. I do not agree that the way to achieve that is to break their spirit and then attempt to rebuild them as 'army'. Surely there is a better way?

Avril Andrew