

## Statement of Mr and Mrs James

3 June 2016

Our thanks to an amazing legal team. Cheryl has been represented by a most talented, dedicated and honest group of professionals who have followed the evidence at every turn. We will never forget what you have done for us.

We would like to thank HH Judge Brian Barker QC, Bridget Dolan QC, counsel to the coroner, and Geoffrey Charnock, the Coroner's Officer. We recognise the care and attention given by the Coroner to this very difficult case and we recognise the task was not an easy one. We thank him for his kind words.

We would also like to thank Brigadier John Donnelly for his apology on behalf of the MOD for the army's failings over so many years. We acknowledge the enormity of the task he has undertaken regarding such failings and we wish him well.

### **Our reaction to the verdict today:**

While we welcome the Coroner's critical findings on the environment at Deepcut (and we say more about that below), we are deeply saddened by the Coroner's conclusions having sat through all of the evidence ourselves and listened carefully to every word. We were prepared to follow the evidence wherever it led, and in our opinion, it did not lead to this verdict. In terms of the environment in which Cheryl lived for the months after she joined the Army, the evidence has revealed serious and profound failures in the care and supervision that ought to have been provided to her and to all the other young people that joined up with her. Deepcut was a toxic and horrible environment for a young woman and we have no doubt that this would have had a terrible impact on those that were required to live in it. We recognise that Cheryl, like so many teenagers, struggled in certain aspects of her life and had suffered some sad experiences. But she had overcome these and was doing well. The main theme of the evidence of those who shared her final days and hours was that she was her usual happy self - some preoccupation with what to do about her two boyfriends but nothing out of the ordinary for a teenage girl. In terms of her final hours and moments, this inquest has suffered terribly from having come 20 years too late. But notwithstanding the impact of the passage of time on the memories of so many, there remain nonetheless some serious and inexplicable omissions and contradictions in the evidence of certain individuals. We remain concerned that certain individuals have been less than truthful. We are therefore very surprised that against that backdrop, the Coroner has decided

that he had sufficient evidence before him to be satisfied that Cheryl took her own life. This was the path urged upon him by the MoD and Surrey Police from the very start and we are so sorry to see that their efforts - motivated we believe in large part by reputation management and damage limitation - appear to have prevailed.

We would also like to make the following comments about other matters revealed by this inquest.

#### **The MoD:**

Despite our immense disappointment at the Coroner's ruling that Cheryl took her own life, we believe this inquest has achieved a great deal. It has finally exposed to public scrutiny the deeply toxic environment in which she and hundreds of other young soldiers were forced to live. It has been immensely important that those soldiers have been heard from themselves. Unworkable supervision ratios of up to 1 supervisor to 300 trainee soldiers were in operation at times. There was an alcohol-fuelled culture with unsupervised access to alcohol, including for those under the age of 18. There was no formal welfare policy and essentially no welfare support for young people, many of whom were under 18, away from home for the first time and vulnerable. Deepcut was a highly sexualised environment with some male supervisors seeing the young female trainees as a sexual challenge. There was nowhere to go for Cheryl or any other young soldier wanting advice and support with any problems she may have been experiencing. The evidence as a whole has revealed a brutal and morally chaotic environment, particularly for young women.

We have acknowledged the apology made by Brigadier John Donnelly. However we recall that the Commanding Officer at Deepcut at the time, Nigel Josling, continues to deny the extent of the problems and denies any responsibility for overseeing such a brutal and abusive environment. Listening to this man give evidence was one of the hardest days for us. And we remain very concerned about the treatment of young women in the armed forces, with sexual harassment and assault apparently still being part of day-to-day life for many service-women.

The MOD only really engaged with the reality of life at Deepcut once their attendance in a court of law became inevitable. After all, they have had in their possession all the available evidence about the camp for many years. Their admissions and their apology could have been delivered years ago - it's been ten years since the Blake Review and twenty years since Cheryl died. We consider it a remarkable coincidence that their apology was ready to be delivered on the first day of Cheryl's inquest. I cannot avoid making the suggestion that this was more a strategic ploy

than a gesture of genuine remorse. To quote my grandmother, "you're not sorry for what you've done, you're sorry you've been caught out".

### **Conduct of Surrey Police and their role:**

It would seem that the Chief Constable of Surrey Police instructed legal counsel, John Beggs QC, to unashamedly pursue a suicide verdict. Any evidence that would tend to suggest a cause of death other than suicide was ignored or undermined; anything that would tend to suggest suicide actively pursued. On occasions this verged on the ridiculous. It was extraordinary. My wife and I were made to feel as though we were on trial and we felt as though our family was undermined at every opportunity. Naively, we really did believe we were there to work together and we found Mr Beggs' approach to be unnecessarily adversarial and unpleasant. We had written to Surrey Police during their 2002 investigation into Cheryl's death, asking questions and raising some perfectly reasonable concerns. Mr Beggs suggested that our enquiries had been distracting Surrey Police from "more pressing enquiries" such as the search for Milly Dowler's killer or the M25 rapist.<sup>1</sup> Milly Dowler's grandmother was so upset at this that she took the time to write to me care of the court to say that she and the family had been "disgusted" at the suggestion by Surrey Police that we had been squandering police time or that Surrey would "use Milly as an excuse not to help" us. This needlessly unpleasant line of questioning hurt both our family and the Dowler family.

Despite Surrey Police's best efforts, the very serious shortcomings in their investigation into Cheryl's death were revealed. Without conducting any investigation at all, in 1995 Surrey Police abandoned the scene of Cheryl's death within forty minutes of their arrival and agreed that the Military Police should be permitted to investigate it for themselves. As a result, the military were allowed to investigate the matter for themselves and they failed to take even the most basic steps to preserve the scene, retain forensic evidence or conduct any form of independent inquiry into a sudden death. These very profound failures in many ways explain why we are still here twenty years later.

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<sup>1</sup> Q (BEGGS). Mr James, you know also, don't you, that whilst this 15-month investigation was being carried out, it just so happens that Surrey Police were also dealing with other very major investigations? A (Mr JAMES). Yes, I am very clear on that. Q. Because when they launched the investigation, the reinvestigation into your daughter's death, on or about 9 July 2002, you know, don't you, that Millie Dowler was still missing and yet to be found? A. Yes, I do now. Q. You also know that a notorious serial rapist had got going and Surrey Police were one of two forces in particular, the M25 rapist, Surrey Police were having to deal with this horrendous serial rapist, weren't they? A. Yes, indeed. I actually made the point, when Chief Inspector Denholm told me he was involved in the Millie Dowler case that they were stretched, their resources were stretched and that they needed help, but I was told that they didn't need any help. Q. They were doing perhaps their valiant best, but did it ever occur to you in the numerous emails, letters and other complaints that you wrote over that 15-month period, did it ever occur to you that you yourself might have been distracting Surrey Police from what some might have thought were even more pressing enquiries -- THE CORONER: No, I am not very happy with that. A. That is a very strange question. MR BEGGS: Perhaps it is strange because -- A. Well, I do think it is strange. THE CORONER: It is all right. I am not happy with it. I am ignoring it. I would like you to move on from there, thank you.

Following the Blake Review and despite a recommendation of that Review, Surrey Police then refused the family access to evidence held in relation to Cheryl's death so we could not see it for ourselves. That evidence would not be released to us for another seven years and only then under the threat of legal action (using the Human Rights Act) by Liberty in 2012.

### **Final remarks**

Whatever actually happened in that final hour of Cheryl's life, we may never know. What we do know is that if she had not been ordered to guard the gate armed and alone, she would still be alive today. The standing order that a female guard should not be armed and alone was repeatedly ignored. The camp command, by their own admission, were not even aware of the order. Yet to date, no one has been held accountable.

It is deeply regrettable that the experiences of other young women and men were ruled out of scope at this inquest. Those that attended because they were able to give evidence about Cheryl (but could not speak about their own experiences in details) could be seen at times to visibly shake with the shock of their memories and when the names of certain people were put to them. The victims of abuse at Deepcut are still suffering. Many to this day have not even told their families about their experiences. They have been airbrushed out of history, forgotten because successive governments refused to act. However we have established that Deepcut was a toxic, abusive and deeply dysfunctional environment that caused immense damage to these kids. The MOD must ensure that those who were its victims are heard and cared for.

My wife and I feel privileged to have been Cheryl's parents. Almost every witness referred to her as happy, smiling, bubbly, fun, generous and kind. We love her dearly, we miss her every day and we always will. It is so hard to accept that we delivered her to that awful camp where we truly believed she would be safe from harm - as the parent of a child who joins the armed forces, you are prepared to accept that one day they may be sent to war and you accept the consequences of that. What you don't expect is to be told that your 18 year old daughter has been found dead from a gunshot wound to the head, alone in the trees near the gate she was tasked with guarding.

We can only hope something good will come of this horrific journey but as of today, we cannot be sure of that.

Cheryl's legacy will remain in our support of the Hope House Children's Hospice, near Oswestry, Shropshire in a memorial fund set up in her name which has already created close to £30,000. Anyone touched by Cheryl's story can make a donation in her memory at:

<http://cheryl-marie-james.muchloved.com>

Des & Doreen James

June 03, 2016