

Statement from Tracy Lewis, Pte Sean Benton's sister, following the verdict in Sean's fresh inquest

Our brother Sean was funny, generous and kind-hearted. He loved his family. And he loved the British Army too. Sean's Grandad had been in the Army and in his application form to sign up, Sean said he wanted to travel the world and support peace-keeping overseas.

Instead, what he got was bullying, violence and a terrible lack of care. When his mental health fell apart, the people in his chain of command who should have looked after him either did nothing – or made things worse.

After it was decided that Sean wasn't right for the Army, he was humiliated, assaulted and bullied. They punished whole groups of trainees for the mistakes of one. This created an environment where it was inevitable that some soldiers would take matters into their own hands and Sean was the victim of a nasty gang, as were other trainees, who beat him up in his bed.

The Coroner has today decided that Sean was deliberately assaulted by a named sergeant, Andrew Gavaghan, on multiple occasions and that this same sergeant badly assaulted other trainees too. The Coroner said it is 'surprising' that no-one in the chain of command was aware of the actions of this violent sadistic bully. My personal view, having sat through all the evidence, is that this bully's colleagues and the chain of command probably did know, and they turned a blind eye.

The Coroner also found today that excessive discipline, violence and inadequate welfare all wore Sean down and affected his ability to cope. I know my brother and I have no doubt that these factors will have contributed to his decision to take his own life.

When the Army finally decided to throw him out, they knew how devastated and vulnerable he was – but did little to make sure he was ok. Even when he asked for help, those who should have cared for him ignored him. So he was able to get a gun and shoot himself.

The Judge today found that had basic precautions been taken that night, Sean would not have been able to get hold of a weapon and do that. Sean was frightened, humiliated and alone.

In the last few months of his life, Sean had nowhere to go. If there had been a good, independent complaints system, or if he had known he could have reported the assaults he suffered to the police, he might have got the help he needed. But at Deepcut, the people who were causing him terrible problems were the same people he would have had to ask for help. So he was stuck.

The Army will say things are different today. I don't believe enough has changed.

If Sean – or a vulnerable young man like him – joined the Army today, I worry that he could go through the same thing. I fear that another family today would have to endure what mine has for 23 years. Our soldiers are still subject to an inferior, second-class justice system – less fair, less thorough and less independent than the civilian one.

We miss Sean every day. My parents both passed away before we were able to get a fresh inquest for him. The questions we asked at this inquest were the ones my parents were asking 23 years ago. But because Surrey Police failed to do what they should have done, and take control of the scene and investigate properly at the time, years of pain have been caused to my family.

Being able to finally question those we have always feared played a part in our brother's death has been a hugely important process for us as a family.

We will be asking the police to open a criminal investigation following the Judge's findings today.

We want to thank Judge Rook QC for the extremely careful and fair way in which he has considered all the evidence and for his acknowledgement that, after all these years, our family's campaign was entirely justified.