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How an army of bullies drove a soldier to suicide

By Josh Gordon
Canberra
August 27, 2003

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An injured trainee soldier hanged himself after enduring a culture of "denigration and harassment", a damning internal army investigation has found.



Jeremy Paul Williams

The soldier, 20-year-old Jeremy Paul Williams, believed he was likely to be discharged because of leg injuries, but his depression was aggravated by bullying at the army's School of Infantry at Singleton, NSW.

After drinking heavily for the best part of a day, Private Williams tied a rope to a tree and hanged himself in the early hours of February 2, while on infantry training near Sydney.

Releasing the results of an investigation that acknowledged a culture of institutionalised shame and bullying, Army Chief Peter Leahy

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yesterday admitted the army's procedures and protocols to prevent abuse had failed and needed reviewing.

"Organisation failure, unacceptable conduct and inappropriate attitudes of staff and trainees toward other trainees at the School of Infantry... contributed to a sense of despair and depression in Private Williams," Lieutenant-General Leahy said.

The investigation's report said that Private Williams - described as friendly, supportive and good-natured - had fallen into a spiral of depression after being sent to a rehabilitation platoon because of a stress injury to his feet suffered on a seven-kilometre march.

Soldiers sent to the rehabilitation and discharge platoon, reportedly known as the leper colony or the home for morons, were perceived as weak because of a belief they were avoiding hard training, the report said.

"As a consequence, all members of the platoon were subjected to widespread denigration and harassment from both staff and (other soldiers) still in training."

Private Williams' parents, Charles and Jan Williams, have blamed the army for their son's death, saying he had loved the life but had been driven to suicide.

Mr Williams told the investigation that he telephoned his son's superiors at the Singleton base four days before his son killed himself, urging them to reassure Jeremy he was not going to be discharged and that his career was on track.

Although Mr Williams asked that the

call be kept confidential, he said that his son had been humiliated when he had found out. The report said it could not be established whether Mr Williams' confidentiality had been breached.

Lieutenant-General Leahy said the army had developed a plan to create a lasting climate of support and positive reinforcement.

"I sincerely regret Private Williams and others were exposed to such conduct and attitudes," he said. "As the Chief of Army and the officer ultimately responsible, I have expressed my regrets and sorrow to the Williams family.

"Sorrow is not enough. Army must do everything it can to ensure that circumstances such as these never occur again."

Minister Assisting the Defence Minister, Danna Vale, put the Defence Department on notice, saying she was deeply concerned by the findings.

"The Government's clear message to Defence is that any form of intimidation and abuse is totally unacceptable," Ms Vale said. "All defence personnel must be treated with respect and with fairness." The report said Private Williams had performed well as a soldier.

The suicide follows a case in which a 15-year-old girl, Eleanore Tibble, hanged herself in November 2000 after attempts to bully her from the Air Training Corps because she was having a relationship with an instructor twice her age.

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