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Why are our soldiers killing themselves?

Exclusive by Frank Walker
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The Sun-Herald

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In loving memory... Eleanore Tibble's mother, Susan Campbell, is comforted at the graveside by another daughter, Maria Campbell. Photo: Roger Lovell

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In the first major civilian probe into what goes on inside closed military compounds, the NSW Coroner will investigate whether bastardisation and bullying in the armed services are leading young recruits to commit suicide.

The Coroner is already examining the cases of two young soldiers who hanged themselves at NSW military bases this year.

In both cases there are claims the soldiers were humiliated, abused and tormented before they took their lives.

Westmead deputy coroner Carl Milovanovich is examining files of military

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suicides to see if there is evidence of systemic abuse.

An Army spokesman said there had been five suicides at the Holsworthy Barracks since 2000, but conceded the Army had not investigated whether there were any common themes such as abuse.

Mr Milovanovich's move follows revelations in *The Sun-Herald* that there were allegations of abuse of at least two other young soldiers who killed themselves at Holsworthy Army base, in south-west Sydney.

If there is evidence of a pattern of abuse leading to deaths, the Coroner's office could combine the cases into one hearing. "If something comes out in investigation that is systemic, like bastardisation or indoctrination ceremonies, it is something we can comment on," he said.

Mr Milovanovich appealed for anyone who had information about cases of brutality in the armed services which might have led to a death to come forward.

It is highly unusual for the Coroner to investigate the reasons behind suicide. It is also unusual for the Coroner to probe the military, as it has the constitutional power to deny the Coroner access to military deaths.

"The military assure us they want to investigate any instance of bastardisation that may have led to the suicides, and they are happy for the Coroner to investigate," Mr Milovanovich said.

It would be the second major inquiry into bastardisation in the military. The Senate Defence Committee is about to start holding public hearings into the way the military investigates itself when military personnel die in accidents or suicide.

Angry families of suicide victims and former military personnel claim there have been

cover-ups, secrecy and lack of action over bastardisation and abuse.

The Coroner's office is looking into the deaths this year of Private Adam Lindsay, 22, of 3RAR, who died from an apparent drug overdose at Holsworthy Barracks on October 23; Private John Satatas, 19, of 4th Field Battery, found hanging at Holsworthy on April 17 and Private Jeremy Williams, 20, who was found hanging at a training base in Singleton on February 2.

State Coroner John Abernethy is assessing an 800-page military report into the death of Williams, which found a culture of harassment and denigration at the base had contributed to his death.

He had been ridiculed, denigrated and bullied after being injured. Williams thought he was going to be thrown out of the Army in disgrace.

His parents, Jan and Charles Williams, have slammed the Army for the way it investigated itself. "We have not had answers to a lot of questions. They won't tell us what happened in his final hours," Mrs Williams said. "They say they changed a number of things after Jeremy's death, but they always blame the system, never the individuals who did it."

Mr Williams, a former Navy diver, said the denigration and humiliation of recruits led to many more suicides and damaged lives than the Army admitted to. "Many lives are being ruined and they killed themselves after quitting the services. That is not on their statistics," he said. "They have tried to gag families with hush clauses in exactly the same way the church tried to gag victims of sex abuse.

"The community needs to know what it is really like beyond the glossy ads and the victory parades."

Mr Williams said the Army had written a

long report after another suicide at Singleton base in 2000, which had also found systemic abuse. "If they had acted on it maybe Jeremy would be alive today and so would a lot of other kids," he said.

Mr Williams said his son trained at Singleton with Private Lindsay, who was denigrated and abused at the camp before he died of an apparent overdose at Holsworthy last month.

Mr Williams believes Lindsay was another suicide. His family did not want to talk.

Sharon Hames, the mother of Private Damian Hames, 22, who was found hanging in his room at Holsworthy Barracks on April 21, 2001, wants her son's death investigated by the Coroner.

Soldiers told police Hames had been ridiculed and harassed over rumours he was gay. One soldier told police Hames had made a homosexual pass at him the night he died, and he was upset at being rebuffed.

Susan Campbell has been battling for three years for an independent investigation into the suicide of her 15-year-old daughter, Air Cadet Eleanore Tibble, who hanged herself in November 2000.

The Tasmanian teenager was accused of "fraternising" with a senior officer, but an Air Force inquiry into her death found she had been humiliated, victimised and pressured to resign without proper procedures.

Mrs Campbell will take her case to the Senate inquiry, demanding those responsible in the RAAF face the consequences. She said: "All they have done is try and get out of their responsibility and depict her as a troubled teenager with problems. She was broken by the military and vilified."

Former soldier Darren Appleby, 30, says he

will give the Senate inquiry an insider's account of the bastardisation that recruits are forced to endure. He joined the Army at 27 but within 12 months he broke down and was discharged as mentally unfit. He said: "It began from day one, and it just went on and on and on. You are treated like shit, abused and threatened.

"I tried to hang myself in my room. I was so desperate I planned to go to a rifle shoot and kill the sergeants and corporals who had abused me and then kill myself."

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