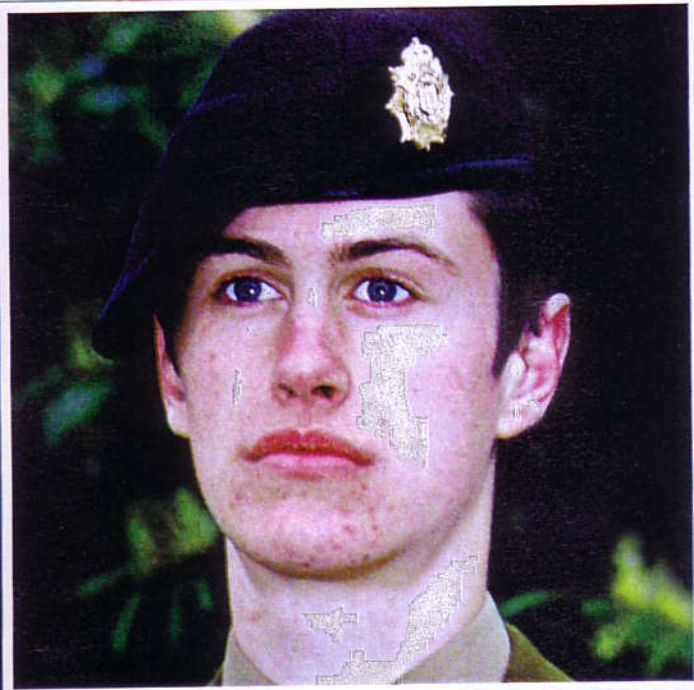




HOW DID

Their deaths at Deepcut barracks were written off as suicide, but the parents of these army recruits suspect they were slaughtered. As a former soldier alleges murder would have been easy, one ballistics expert believes he knows the truth behind the shootings
Investigation by Eamonn O'Neill



THEY DIE?

Jim and Yvonne Collinson are soaked to the skin. Spears of rain pound against the window of the Perth restaurant where they sit. There are few customers: maybe half a dozen jovial businessmen. Jim has to shout to make himself heard above the background music: "We're ... the ... parents ... of ... Private ... James ... Collinson ... who ... died ... at ... Deepcut ... on ... March ... 23rd ... 2002." The businessmen's heads snap up when they hear this. Their laughing stops and their voices drop.

The Collinsons aren't together as a couple any longer – that ended a few years ago – but they come along to interviews like this as a team. They accepted long ago that their loss was part of something bigger. They are connected to three other families who lost children at the Deepcut army

barracks over the past decade. In each case the British Army claimed the recruits died from self-inflicted rifle wounds, but the families refuse to accept this. They have questions that still haven't been answered.

The faces and names of the four dead soldiers – Sean Benton, who died in 1995; Cheryl James, who died the same year; Geoff Gray, who died in 2001 and James Collinson, from Perth, who died in 2002 – are becoming fixed in the public mind. "At the end of the day we're looking for a full public inquiry," says Jim Collinson. Yvonne nods in agreement: "We've had a Surrey Police investigation which took 15 months and cost £1m. But it still hasn't told us what happened to our son."

The families agree that the various inquiries and investigations have failed to answer their questions. Even a government-ordered independent review seems to be having problems getting witnesses to testify. Frank Swann, a forensic expert who specialises in ballistics, says he has valuable information relating to an

independent examination he carried out inside Deepcut barracks, but he is not keen on appearing before the review: he is only willing to testify before a full public judicial inquiry. Yet he might be the one person who can prove whether the soldiers committed suicide – as the authorities maintain – or not. In his most detailed interview yet, Swann has told *The Herald Magazine* categorically that the current explanation of the deaths is 100 per cent wrong. His words are unequivocal and blunt: "There were third parties involved and it was murder in all four cases."

The Collinsons' nightmare began with a knock on the door of Jim's Perthshire home early on the morning of Sunday March 24, 2002. On the doorstep was a retired army major with news of 17-year-old James's death. At first he termed it "an accident". Jim had to break the news to the couple's younger children, Stuart and Claire; he says it took him four attempts to say the words. Then he had to call Yvonne, who was living in the ▶