



Ministry
of Defence

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Reference: FOI PF 07-03-2014-085602-001 [REDACTED] correspondence dated: 6 March 2014

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Date: 31 March 2014

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for your email of 6 March 2014 requesting the following information:

"I am seeking information on the number of servicemen and servicewomen (who were active at the time) in the British armed forces who committed suicide using a firearm. I am requesting information from January 2003 to the present day.

If possible, please provide information such as the location of where the suicide occurred e.g. what country, which barracks etc.

I would like to receive the information in an electronic format. I am willing to negotiate the timeframe if it is considered to be too broad and time-consuming thus engaging section 12.

If you feel that a substantive response to this request is not possible within a reasonable time frame, or the request is too broad, I would be grateful if you could contact me by telephone [REDACTED] and provide assistance as to how I could refine the request."

I am treating your correspondence as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2000.

A search for the information has now been completed within the Ministry of Defence, and I can confirm that information in scope of your request is held. Some information held by the Department falling within scope of your request falls entirely within the scope of the absolute exemptions provided for at section 44 (Prohibitions on disclosure) and qualified exemptions provided for at section 38 (Health and Safety) of the FOIA and has been withheld.

Section 44(1)(a) has been applied to some of the information as disclosure of that information is prohibited by or under any enactment. Defence Statistics (Health) release annual updates on suicides in the Armed Forces as a National Statistic publication. In accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and the Code of Practice for the release of National/Official Statistics we are unable to provide the data for 2014 prior to the next statistical release, due on 26 March 2015. The latest edition can be found at the below link :

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mod-national-and-official-statistics-by-topic>

Section 38 (1)(a) is a qualified exemption and is subject to public interest testing which means that the information requested can only be withheld if the public interest in doing so outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

Section 38 has been applied to providing the location of suicides by firearms because the small number of deaths could lead to the inadvertent disclosure of identities and this information would endanger the physical or mental health of any individual. Whilst the MOD recognises that there is continuing interest in deaths among personnel serving in the UK Armed Forces and that in releasing information the MOD

would be promoting accountability and transparency, it is likely that the inadvertent disclosure of identities would adversely affect the psychological and emotional well being of next of kin and the MOD has a residual duty of care for the next of kin of those Service personnel who die whilst in-Service and for these reasons I have set the level of prejudice against release of the exempted information at the higher level of “would” rather than “would be likely to”. The balance of public interest was found to be in favour of withholding the information.

Between 1 January 2003 and 31 December 2013 there were **28** coroner confirmed suicide or open verdict deaths among UK regular Armed Forces personnel where the method used was due to a firearm. Of which:

- **24** coroner confirmed suicide and open verdict deaths occurred on MOD property and **four** were not on MOD property at the time of the incident.
- **19** coroner confirmed suicide or open verdict deaths occurred in the UK, **11** of which occurred in England and **five** in Northern Ireland.
- In addition, there were a further **13** deaths where the cause of death suggests suicide, **one** of which used a firearm, but at the time of publication of Deaths in the UK Regular Armed Forces 2013, a coroner’s inquest had not yet taken place (see background note). Therefore the figure provided is a minimum and may be subject to change.

Under section 16 of the Act (Advice and Assistance) I can advise that Defence Statistics (Health) compiles the Department’s authoritative deaths database for all **UK Armed Forces personnel who died whilst in Service** going back to 1984. Information is compiled from several internal and external sources from which we release a number of internal analyses and external National Statistics Notices.

When providing statistics on suicides, Defence Statistics (Health) rely exclusively on the information provided by coroners in England and Wales and in Northern Ireland, and the Procurator Fiscal in Scotland. This ensures the Department’s objectivity, as all accidental deaths and those resulting from violent action have to be referred to these officials for investigation. For sake of brevity these sources of information have been labelled collectively as “coroner’s verdicts”.

The statistics provided include both coroner-confirmed suicides and open verdict deaths, in line with the definition used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), since research has shown that these deaths share many similarities with suicides except that in the case of open verdict deaths, the intention of the deceased to take their life has not been sufficiently proven to the satisfaction of the coroner.

Defence Statistics have undertaken a review of the deaths for which a verdict was outstanding (waiting verdict), as a proportion of those occurred a number of years ago and in some instances the deaths occurred overseas. Following investigations with Office for National Statistics and the Defence Inquest Unit, Defence Statistics have been unable to trace nine awaiting verdicts prior to 2007 and it have deemed it unlikely that the final outcome of these deaths (such as inquests) will be traced. The waiting verdicts that Defence Statistics were aware of prior to 2007 were for deaths that occurred to Service personnel overseas. As such Defence Statistics have identified that the earliest death still awaiting a coroner’s inquest occurred in 2007. Thus the waiting verdicts identified in this response cover the period 2007-2013, these records will be updated once the result of the coroner inquests are made available.

Figures are for tri-Service regular and reservist personnel.

Every suicide is a tragedy and our thoughts remain with the families of all those who have sadly taken their own lives. Suicide amongst members of the Armed Forces remains extremely rare and is lower than comparative rates in the civilian population. There has also been a very clear downward trend in suicide and underdetermined death rates in the Armed Forces over the last 30 years. Mental health of our personnel and veterans is a top priority for the Government that is why we have committed £7.4 million to ensure there is extensive mental health support in place for everyone who needs it.

We also have a wide range of support including tailored NHS mental health services, priority treatment for veterans, the Big White Wall online mental health wellbeing service and a 24-hour helpline with Combat Stress so Service Personnel and Veterans can seek help at any time.

Would you like to be added to our contact list, so that we can inform you about updates to our statistical publications covering deaths in the UK Armed Forces and consult you if we are thinking of making changes? You can subscribe to updates by emailing: DefStrat-Stat-Health-PQ-FOI@mod.uk

If you are not satisfied with this response or you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, then you should contact me in the first instance. If informal resolution is not possible and you are still dissatisfied then you may apply for an independent internal review by contacting the Information Rights Compliance team, 1st Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date on which the attempt to reach informal resolution has come to an end.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.ico.gov.uk>.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours sincerely

Defence Statistics (Health) Head (B1)