

# VICTIMS OF THE KILLER SOLDIERS

Between 2009 and 2019, 52 current or former members of the armed forces were convicted of the murder or manslaughter of women. These are their victims



# The army's dirty secret

Hannah Al-Othman and Megan Agnew

Alice Ruggles was the sort of person who could make friends wherever she went. She loved to play pranks on her family, joke with colleagues, give birthday presents and sing karaoke. "Everyone around her found it very easy to love her," her mother Sue said.

When Ruggles, a sales executive, was 24, she was murdered by her ex-boyfriend, Trimaan Dhillon, a serving soldier. He broke into her flat and slit her throat after she broke up with him.

After her death, the family learnt that Dhillon had previously been charged with assault against another ex-girlfriend while living in army barracks in Kent, and issued with a restraining order.

Yet he had been allowed to remain in the army, and there was no formal record of his criminal history on his files. When the police called the army to tell them he should be kept away from Ruggles, no one made a record of the call.

"Nothing was done by the military to manage the risk to Alice," her sister, Emma, a serving soldier, told a review after her death.

Ruggles is one of dozens of women who have been killed by soldiers or ex-soldiers in just over a decade.

Charities, however, have said that violence against women in the army is a serious problem. Men are being allowed to continue in the armed forces after being found guilty of violence against women – in some cases even being promoted.

"The regular deployment of a military family makes it very difficult for the spouse to maintain any sort of career path, which can lead to financial dependence on the military [partner]," says Rebecca Hosdon, lead practitioner at a domestic abuse charity based in North Yorkshire.

Moving onto an army base can be used by perpetrators as a way to exert power and control", Dillon adds. "The best way to isolate a victim anywhere, armed forces or not, is to move them – well, the armed forces allows you to do that."

Forced to rely on their husband for accommodation and living expenses, military wives can find it difficult to leave abusive relationships – particularly where there are children involved.

Nathan Dillon, head of personal support at the Army Welfare Service, says he recognises the problem. "Families are quite often away from their other social networks that they originated from, their parents, from their siblings, things like that. That absolutely is a risk factor."

To live on army property, couples must be married. If the marriage breaks down – even if caused by the husband's violence – wives can be evicted, and given only 93 days to start again, and find a new home with their children.

Charities and victims say that if a marriage breaks down, the concern of the

## Soldiers guilty of violence against women are being allowed to continue their careers – some are even promoted. Victims say these archaic attitudes can have deadly consequences

ing to be shut down to new referrals every four or five months", Dillon says. Lynne, a military wife who works for the charity and did not want to give her full name, says "there was so much coming through that I couldn't cope with the volume of the referrals any more."

There is no doubt among the staff that there is a problem with domestic violence in the armed forces. They are concerned that that record is being kept of the number of incidents.

"If you think that men's violence against women is important, then it's really important to record data," Karen Ingala Smith from the Femicide Census said. "It's through understanding something that we can start to end it."

Almost a quarter of those who come to Aurora New Dawn having experienced domestic violence in the military self-refere, an unusually high number for a domestic violence service. This is because the victims do not want the armed forces to know they have asked for support, Lynne says, particularly female victims who are serving soldiers.

Having grown up in a small town, as part of a naval family, Dillon was mindful of the specific challenges for domestic violence victims, living in the "community within a community" that is an army base. In a place where "everyone knows everyone", it can be difficult to report abuse – and isolation from social networks can make it easier for perpetrators to hide from consequences they could not avoid in civilian society.

"There's some good policies, there's some good changes in progress," Dillon says. "But there is a lot to do."

Rebekah had decided to have an abortion – "I wanted to finish college" – but her partner sent an expensive buggy to her house, then turned up at the door-step and "proposed to me, bawling his eyes out". She agreed to keep the baby.

When she was six months pregnant, the couple moved to an army base in Germany. "The night before my 19th birthday, he threw me downstairs, strangled me, bit me, punched me in the face," she says. "He ripped all the baby clothes out of the wardrobe that I'd had hanging up."

"I didn't hear anything else from them," she said. "Nobody came to check on me, welfare didn't care. They all knew, everybody knew about it, the whole flipping camp knew about it, but I've never had a single utterance of support from any member of the armed forces or welfare. So many women are going through the same thing, and they just put up with it. They just keep quiet because they don't have careers. Most of them can't drive. Once you get trapped in that cycle

of abuse and being made to feel like you can't escape... you won't."

It was only after the most serious assault two years later that Rebekah's ex-partner was finally convicted. "He properly, properly beat me up," she says. "Dragged me out of bed, chucked me down the stairs, punched me in the face, kicked me in the stomach. Got our eldest son out of bed to watch."

He was jailed for nine months in January 2014 when he appeared at a military court in Germany and admitted assault committed bodily harm. He was sent to Colchester military prison. Yet after his release, his regiment accepted him back. He later left of his own accord, but joined the Army Reserve where he still serves.

When Rebekah told the army she wanted to return to the UK, she says, "the army welfare officer marched me to the ATM and made me give him of the money that was in our bank account to my ex."

Rebekah believes that attitudes "have not changed. They believe the woman's place is at home, to pop out children for their husbands. That their husbands can go up to the mess, get drunk five days a week, come home, and a meal should be laid out on the table. And you should keep quiet, because you're a kept woman. That's the attitude."

"It was clear from day one that their commitment, their priority was their soldier. As long as he still turns up to work, that's all they care about."

Asked why Rebekah's ex-partner was readmitted, a spokesman said he could not comment on individual cases.

But Peter Davis, who is the lead of armed forces families and safeguarding, said it was a "fair point" that the work the army was doing centrally to tackle domestic violence was at times being blocked by individual units. The army had "done lots of internal work to try to identify where we need to change the culture and the armed forces", he said.

### RAPED SUSPECT PROMOTED

Laura is still serving in the armed forces, and lives on a base with her young children. But she is trying to save enough money to leave, and start all over again.

After she reported her husband's abuse, he moved out of their home, but has been allowed to remain on the base. She says he parks his car next to hers on purpose. She describes the situation as "horrible" and is desperate to leave.

"[In] the first incident where the army got involved, he locked us in the house, me and the children, and got a knife," she said. Her husband was arrested, but then released and brought back to her home. The army started to give the couple marriage counselling. "No one has a clue," she says. "You don't give an [abuser] marriage counselling." This was in March last year. "And then in July," she says, "he raped me."

He was placed under investigation, but despite this, he was promoted. Laura, a serving soldier, was not so lucky. "My SJAR [yearly appraisal] reflected that I'd been in and out of work for police appointments, things like that [due to the rape]," she says. "So I didn't [get a promotion] and he did. So that also then put him in a position of power, because he was a higher rank than me as well."

Laura was offered Army Welfare Service support, and began seeing the mental health team. "But then they dis-



charged me from there, because they got up to the mess, got drunk five days a week, discharged so that he could go."

### YOUR DUTY IS TO SAY NOTHING

Laura was a soldier, but being a non-military partner was difficult. "You're a dependent – comes with all your own challenges. Isolated from family and friends – in lifestyle and, often, distance – and with a transient lifestyle making it difficult in many cases to hold down a career; army life can render civilian wives and partners extremely vulnerable. The environment is ideal for domestic abusers to exert control, experts say.

Abusers tend to try to isolate their victims, estranging them from their families and social networks, making them as socially, financially and legally dependent as possible. Domestic abuse charities believe army life does this to soldiers' dependents as a matter of course.

The regular deployment of a military family makes it very difficult for the spouse to maintain any sort of career path, which can lead to financial dependence on the military [partner]," says Rebecca Hosdon, lead practitioner at a domestic abuse charity based in North Yorkshire.

### TRIMAAN DHILLON, PICTURED WITH DAVID CAMERON, AGNES WANJIRU, WHO WAS MURDERED IN KENYA IN 2012

regiment tends to be for the serving partner – even if it is his domestic violence that has caused the marriage to fail.

This was the case for Rachael, whose soldier husband was removed from their home on the base and placed in the accommodation block after he drunkenly attacked her one night, throttling her until she passed out while their baby slept in another room.

Rachael met the unit welfare officer and said she wanted to leave, but said it was clear he was the priority. "They wanted him stable and on an even keel mentally so that he was deployable, and so they wanted me to stay put. I remember saying, 'I just want to go home,' and he said, 'The last thing we need is [your husband] coming back from exercise one evening to find you've done a runner'."

Rachael's husband later declared to the army that they had separated. This led to her being issued a 93-day notice to vacate their home. "You are only there due to being married to a soldier and when that ends so does your right to remain," she says. "Your husband is effectively your landlord." She did not have the money to consult a lawyer.

"A lot of military wives can't work because they don't have an employment record, they got married so young," Rachael says. "They don't own a house. If you leave, you're making yourself intentionally homeless, taking the kids away from a home, a creche, a doctor, a community. How do you leave that?"

"We need to be given real options if we leave. Wives don't feel like they have anything in the outside world, so domestic violence isn't reported."

Rachael's husband was convicted at a military court of assault causing bodily harm but she reconciled with him. "He said, 'Let's make a go of it. I looked at my tiny flat and baby and no family, and thought, f\*\*\* it. It was much easier to go on base. I was earning peanuts, I couldn't survive.'"

While he was serving his suspended sentence, her husband was promoted, and given an award for his soldiering. The assault was never mentioned by the army again and Rachael said she was offered no support or counselling. Meanwhile, his controlling behaviour worsened.

Finally, in 2020, Rachael decided to sign onto universal credit, find a flat of her own and leave. Rachael used to have

the sort of job that impressed people at dinner parties. She hopes to find something similar again. "Everything is very 1950s in the army," she says. "Women do things like cake bakes for charity, fun days for the children. We make placards for when the men get back. We're called 'the wives'. They say, 'What are the wives doing today?' It's very twee. F\*\*\* that. It's a cycle of dependency."

WOMEN TOLD HOW TO DRESS  
On military bases, wives are constantly reminded that their behaviour is a reflection on their husband. If a wife breaks a rule, or misses an appointment, it can result in her husband receiving a dressing-down from his superiors.

Ahead of military functions, they describe being provided with illustrated guides telling them what they can and cannot wear. One even told how she was given a guide on how to hold a fork to eat her vegetables – prongs down for broccoli, prongs up for carrots.

While the military needs order, control and discipline to function effectively, and soldiers must be trained in violence, charities worry that that is not enough to prevent these practices from distorting marital relationships.

Sophie endured more than five years of physical abuse and coercive control before leaving her husband six months ago. "He slowly isolated me from friends and family, he treated me like a child," she said. They couple lived on an army base with their children. "In a military setting, nothing is normal. Everybody is isolated from their lives. So the control was able to escalate very quickly."

Sophie's husband did not let her meet friends and controlled her food, weight and finances, giving her £300 "pocket money" each month. Like other military wives with children, she says, she was not able to get a job because of the unpredictability of her husband's. Sometimes he was deployed with just a few days' notice.

He was also physically abusive. "He punched me in the side, he grabbed me by the neck, he would push me and kick me through doorways, throw things at me, he threatened to strangle me and to bury me," she says.

Sophie gave a statement to police last month, and her soldier partner has been

necessarily mean we, as his employers, have any further role to play". Douglas disagreed. His review recommended that the MoD record all domestic abuse allegations against personnel, which it agreed to do. Other recommendations included a policy to formalise the way in which information was passed between civilian and military police, and a review into its domestic abuse policy, specifically when victims do not serve in the military or live on military property, as was the case with Ruggles. Both policies, according to the army, have been "refreshed".

Douglas felt the army's "defensive" approach "indicated a feeling of 'protecting' the reputation of the organisation rather than learning and improvement".

Diton of the Army Welfare Service insists things are improving. He says that since 2018 all welfare service support personnel have had to undertake specialist training in domestic abuse.

"We've absolutely upped our engagement with civilian, local authorities and other partners," he said. "We regularly attend multi-agency risk assessment conferences now, where we will partner and share information with regard to domestic abuse within the army."

Ben Wallace, the defence secretary, said "the fact that any woman is murdered by a partner or ex-partner with links to the armed forces is completely unacceptable", but said that "as an employer, the armed forces is leading the way in tackling 'refreshed'."

He said that the armed forces had begun a domestic abuse strategy,

made to start an anger management programme. He is still serving in the military. She tried to seek help from SSAFA. But was told that now she was fighting him in the divorce courts, she did not qualify for legal advice or pastoral support.

ARMY MISSED OPPORTUNITIES  
Just as the police have had to sign up to hold themselves to a higher standard in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard, "that is the same for the military", O'Callaghan says.

She says the government should consider "whether or not there is a collective responsibility on the state to address the harm", caused by military personnel who kill their partners. "There's a collective responsibility to provide redress for those that are victims," she adds.

For the Ruggles family, life without Alice will never be the same. Trimaan Dhillon was jailed in 2017 for a minimum of 22 years for her murder, but publication of the domestic homicide review into the death was delayed by the army's lacklustre response.

"The response was too 'limited', with key personnel 'unavailable' to be interviewed, according to Stuart Douglas, who chaired the review. "They weren't ready to examine their shortcomings."

In 2018, the review finally concluded that there was a "clear gap" in the level of information recorded by the army.

Dhillon's past behaviour – a previous arrest for assaulting an ex-partner and a subsequent restraining order, which his barracks was aware of – had not been formally recorded by the military. When he was stalking and harassing Ruggles years later, she called Northumbria police twice, and they contacted the army about his behaviour, instructing him to stay away from her – yet this call was not formally recorded either.

"Other public services tend to make a record when there's a safeguarding concern about your employee," Douglas said. "The [army] are a long way behind other public services. They weren't building up a picture of their soldiers. Formal records are all the more important in instances of domestic abuse and sexual violence, because it is often a long-term pattern."

The army claimed that "simply because [Dhillon] is a soldier does not



IN NUMBERS

16,710

Number of women serving in the armed forces

93

Number of days a woman is given to vacate her army house if her marriage breaks down, regardless of fault

153

Number of armed forces referrals to the domestic violence charity Aurora New Dawn between 2018 and 2021

appointed a domestic abuse awareness champion, made it easier to report incidents, and was implementing recommendations from the homicide review.

"We have made progress, but I have been very clear that more needs to be done," he added. "I will not condone or tolerate any behaviour that falls below the high standards expected."

Four hundred people came to Ruggles's funeral – busloads of her colleagues from Sky, the broadcaster, travelled to Leicestershire, where the family live, just outside Market Harborough.

"The loss of a child is every parent's worst nightmare," her father Clive said. "But it affects so many other people too. Her sister and brothers, her wider family and of course all her friends, stretching back to childhood."

"The loss of a child is every parent's worst nightmare," her father Clive said. "But it affects so many other people too. Her sister and brothers, her wider family and of course all her friends, stretching back to childhood."

Clive and his wife Sue raise awareness of stalking and coercive control through the Alice Ruggles Trust.

"You get on with your lives, but life never returns to normal," he added. "There will always be those moments when something said, or a familiar tune, or one of a hundred other things, suddenly triggers a poignant memory and stops you in your tracks. What happened to Alice has affected so many of us in many different ways, but Alice's vibrant personality remains with us all, every day, as it always will."

Some victims' names have been changed @HannahAlOthman

### SYSTEMIC PROBLEM

When The Sunday Times revealed last year how squadries had laughed and joked about the sex worker Agnes Wanjiru being murdered and dumped in a septic tank by a British soldier in Kenya in 2012, the case shone a light on the attitudes towards violence against women in some sections of the armed forces.

Nothing was done to manage the risk to Alice

### NOT EVEN A REPRIMAND

Jayne, a decorated soldier, is trying to build a new, civilian life. She says she was in effect forced to give up her career after sending her abuser – also a soldier – to prison.

She was attacked so badly that paramedics initially thought she had been in a car accident. Her skull was fractured and her ribs were broken. She has photographs of the footprint-shaped bruises he left on her body. It was only after the attack that Jayne learnt that her partner had a conviction for an assault on a former girlfriend. Despite that, the army had allowed him to stay on. Even after he



was arrested for attempted murder after attacking Jayne, he was allowed to keep his rank and his job up to the point that he was found guilty of causing grievous bodily harm and jailed.

"[The police] took all the evidence to his chain of command and their words were... innocent until proven guilty," she said. "Even after his previous conviction... he wasn't even reprimanded, or anything like that."

Before the assault, Jayne had sought help from the Army Welfare Service over his controlling behaviour but because he had not then been physically violent, they "didn't understand" and failed to offer any support, she says.

When her ex-partner was finally jailed, Jayne says that far from being supported as a victim, her colleagues turned on her. In the end, she felt she had no choice but to leave, giving up a career spanning three decades, including service in Afghanistan. She is being supported by Aurora New Dawn. "Without them, I can a hundred per cent say I would not have got through any of this," she said.

### CHARITY OVERWHELMED

Aurora New Dawn accepts roughly one referral like Jayne every week. Demand is far higher than that, but the charity – based in a small office in the Fratton area of Portsmouth – cannot cope with more. It has secured a bridging grant with the Army Central Fund to continue its work.

Dillon, 46, the charity's founder, has worked with domestic violence victims for nearly three decades. It once took referrals from all three armed services, but funding cuts have reduced its work to only the army.

Before the cuts, the charity was "hav-

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