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Suicide probe further proof military police not up to task

The dust is settling too quickly on the battle between Canadian Forces Provost Marshal Rob Delaney and Military Police Complaints Commissioner Glenn Stannard.

The Military Police Complaints Commission issued its report on the investigations into the suicide of Cpl. Stuart Langridge on March 10.

Cpl. Langridge hanged himself in his base accommodations at Canadian Forces Base Edmonton on March 15, 2008, concluding his downward spiral of drug and alcohol abuse following his return from deployments to Bosnia- Herzegovina and Afghanistan. Prior to this, his work-related performance was praiseworthy.

Tragically, efforts to help him were either inadequate or he was unable to accept the helping hands extended to him.

We will never know what might have calmed his troubled mind or helped him defeat his demons. We only know that he deployed as a healthy soldier and returned from his final deployment a very different person, overwhelmed by ghosts from his past.

He left a suicide note addressed to his mother, telling her that he wished to escape his pain and that he wanted a small, family funeral.

With their typical zeal, the military police swept in and scooped up anything and everything that might qualify as “evidence,” including Stuart’s note to his mom — a note she would not know about for 14 months.

The Military Police National Investigation Service (NIS) conducted three investigations related to Stuart’s passing. The first looked into the circumstances of his death; the second was into the decision for his former common-law partner, from whom he was separated, to manage his funeral; and the third into whether efforts to provide him effective medical care were negligent.

The Military Police Complaints Commission’s report details the many errors and failures of the NIS that call into question its competence and moral authority to conduct investigations into sudden deaths; indeed, into any serious matters.

The commission pointed specifically to the military police decision to withhold the suicide note as a contemptible example. As a result, his parents were denied control over funeral arrangements, extinguishing Stuart’s wishes for a modest family funeral.

Some of the commission’s key recommendations include:

- Active supervision of MP investigators during sudden death investigations;

- Improved communications with affected families during sudden death investigations;
- MP investigators should seek temporary placements with civilian police forces to improve their skills;
- Experienced federal, provincial or municipal police investigators should lead sudden death investigations;
- Property seized as part of an investigation should be immediately returned to families when no longer needed as evidence.

Following the release of the commission’s report, Canadian Forces Provost Marshal, Col. Rob Delaney, the military’s police chief, acknowledged the relative inexperience of the NIS in these types of investigations. “Since 2008, however,” Delaney said, “the CFNIS has investigated over 175 sudden deaths and has gained considerable experience in this regard.”

Col. D.A. Cooper, one of Delaney’s predecessors, wrote a letter on Aug. 18, 2003, apologizing to the subject of a year-long military police investigation instigated in 1994 by the questionable allegations of “a disgruntled junior officer” against his superior.

The military police demonstrated a clear lack of judgment, she wrote. “In my view, errors were made and best police practices were not adhered to during the conduct of the Halifax MP investigation. Most certainly the 1994 investigation did not meet today’s policing standards.”

Clearly, “best police practices” that were missing in that 1994 investigation are nowhere to be found in the Langridge investigation 14 years later.

The successful arrests and prosecutions of disgraced Col. Russ Williams by the Ontario Provincial Police in 2009 and of Navy Lt. Jeffrey Delisle by the RCMP in January 2012, strongly suggest that we do not need the military police.

Rather than fix a badly broken military police organization, Defence Minister Jason Kenney should note that the wartime employment of the Canadian military police, called the Provost Corps, was restricted to custody of prisoners of war and vehicle management on roadways within and leading to battle areas.

Even then, real police work was largely accomplished by the RCMP, who would deploy with the Canadian military.

Perhaps real savings and improved policing might come from expanding the RCMP to police operations in the Canadian Forces, closing the Canadian Forces Military Police Academy in CFB Borden, Ont.

The military police could be redesignated as a reserve (part-time) organization, to be activated only in overseas deployments and in wartime for custody of prisoners of war and vehicle control.

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