



Ministry
of Defence

SECRETARY OF STATE
MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
FLOOR 5, ZONE D, MAIN BUILDING
WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

[REDACTED]

21 April 2023

Dear Senior Coroner,

I am writing in response to your Prevention of Future Deaths report delivered under paragraph 7, Schedule 5, of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 and regulations 28 and 29 of the Coroners' (Investigations) Regulations 2013, in respect of the Inquest held following the double murder trial of [REDACTED], a former Commando trained Royal Engineer. In your report you set out the circumstances giving rise to your concern.

The murder weapon in this case was never recovered but the police informed you that, to the best of their knowledge, the dagger was a "[REDACTED]". These are commonly referred to as a Commando Dagger although are officially termed as Combat Fighting Knife. It has been suggested that a Combat Fighting Knife was presented to the perpetrator on his termination of service from the British Army, his final employment being at 24 Commando Engineer Regiment. It is worth noting that, even if the weapon was recovered, it is not possible to determine if it had been supplied through the MOD or legally purchased from a commercial UK source.

Where the Regulation 28 Report refers to a "ceremonial dagger", my response refers to the MOD issued Combat Fighting Knife, although implications will be considered for all combat related knives. Additionally, this response is not restricted to the British Army but has considered Defence as a whole, given that the Combat Fighting Knife is a capability 'owned' by the Royal Navy but is available to specific establishments and personnel from all three Services.

However, I hope that this response confirms that the Ministry of Defence has learned lessons from the tragic deaths of Mr and Mrs Chapple and that the necessary corrective action is being taken in response to your report, and that the families draw some comfort from this. As ever, my thoughts remain with them.

Samantha Marsh
HM Senior Coroner
Municipal Buildings
Old Corporation Street
Taunton
TA1 4AQ

Matter of Concern 1 – “Please reconsider the appropriateness of providing anyone leaving the British Army, regardless of rank or status, with what is (to all intents and purposes) a deadly weapon.”

The MOD does not consider it appropriate to provide Combat Fighting Knives to anyone other than those who require such an item for a specific combat role. The Combat Fighting Knife is available to only 21 accounts within Defence all of which are connected to 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines or Specialist Military Units.

MOD policy is very clear: No-one is permitted to make a gift of MOD property without specific approval from the correct authority. Each MOD business unit has a focal point who provide advice on gifting policy, assess individual gifting proposals and where appropriate give guidance on the approval requirements. Service personnel would not ordinarily be viewed as permitted recipients of gifts although some discretion is allowed which is outlined in Defence policy. The relevant Top Level Budget authorities confirmed that there are no records of Combat Fighting Knives having been gifted.

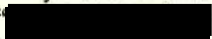
Existing MOD policy clearly states that failure to comply can and does lead to investigation with a range of disciplinary sanctions available. Policy clearly states that any suspicions of fraud, theft, bribery and corruption as well as unethical behaviour, value for money concerns and related irregularity should be reported to the Chain of Command or to an existing confidential hotline/email; furthermore, it outlines Defence's intentions concerning prevention and detection, and sanctions that may be applied to culprits. In this regard, Defence works to the expectation that all staff guilty of committing fraud (including theft) will be dismissed from the Service, be placed on the Government Internal Fraud Database and may be prosecuted.

Since 28 Feb 2019 MOD supplied 2031 Combat Fighting Knives to entitled units. In comparison, over the same period Amazon-UK's 4th best-selling Chef's knife, which has comparable lethality to the Combat Fighting Knife, has been reviewed over 3,300 times, and undoubtedly sold far in excess of this figure: these are sold to the public online and delivered subject to an age check. This is but one of many potentially lethal knives and tools sold legally in the UK.

I consider that MOD's existing measures are appropriate, however, I have written to the General Officers Commanding the Units entitled to demand/issue Combat Fighting Knives, in order to remind them:

- a. To ensure there is genuine requirement to issue such items to personnel.
- b. To ensure misappropriation of such items are thoroughly investigated and grounds for prosecution or disciplinary proceedings, applied in the strictest sense.

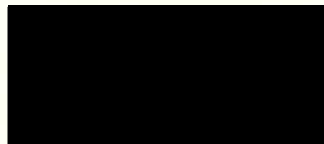
Matter of Concern 2 – “Such presentation/gifting has essentially put a deadly weapon in the community and I am not persuaded that this is appropriate.”

There is a tradition within the MOD of presenting leaving gifts to individuals when they exit the Armed Forces. A Combat Fighting Knife as part of a presentational display is one of many gifts that may be presented to a Service person departing military units associated with the Commando role, especially with 3 Commando Brigade. Such items are provided using non-public funds such as a collection from colleagues. Combat Fighting Knives and associated display materials are widely available from a range of suppliers commercially within the UK subject to an age check. Whilst the military chain of command could issue a Standing Order prohibiting Service personnel gifting specific items such as Combat Fighting Knives to Service leavers, such an Order would be of limited utility. It is worth noting that on google.co.uk there are in excess of 160,000 hits on “ knives for sale”, thus suggesting that commercial (and perfectly legal) availability is the primary source of proliferation in the community.

It is worth noting that personnel employed at units entitled to issue the Combat Fighting Knife are trained to a high standard. They are required to conduct annual rules of armed conflict training including rules of engagement and proportionate application of force. This is a population that have a heightened understanding of the Combat Fighting Knife’s potential lethality, and to only utilise violence when absolutely necessary.

I consider existing restrictions upon gifting of MOD property to be sufficient, however, I have written to the Service Chiefs in order to inform them of this horrific murder and remind them of their duty to ensure that misappropriation of MOD items is identified and investigated. Moreover, that the issue of potentially lethal items should be scrutinised to ensure genuine requirement, and that misappropriation of such items, including combat knives of any type, should be thoroughly investigated and the strictest sanctions applied as a future deterrent.

Yours sincerely,



THE RT HON BEN WALLACE MP