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Church of Scientology defied coroner on suicide

Sarah Elks | October 23, 2009

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THE Church of Scientology refused to provide records demanded by a coroner investigating the death of a soldier who committed suicide two days after finishing one of the church's intensive courses.

It emerged yesterday that the American headquarters of the church instructed its Australian branch to send the soldier's "audit file" to the US -- which is outside the coroner's jurisdiction -- before warrants were issued.

Edward Alexander McBride was found electrocuted and hanged at an Energex substation at Everton Park, in Brisbane, on February 7, 2007. The soldier, who was based at Brisbane's Enoggera Barracks, was on leave from the army at the time and had been doing Scientology courses almost full-time for about a month.

An inquest into his death found he was considered a "loner" by his fellow soldiers and had been subjected to bullying.

McBride had paid the church \$25,000 for the courses and finished the last one two days before he died.

In interim inquest findings handed down last week, coroner John Lock said that was when "something unusual happened".

Mr Lock said requests by police and him for the Church of Scientology to see McBride's audit file were unsuccessful.

"An 'audit' and 'ethics' files (sic) which may have recorded personal information ... despite formal requests, was not produced to the inquest," he wrote, noting that the actions of the Australian church in moving the file were legal, because it was before the warrants were issued.

"Mr McBride's attitude changed some time after the afternoon of February 5, 2007, and these files may very well have had some information which could give the inquest some assistance in determining what happened," he said.

Mr Lock said the Australian church authorities appeared to have been obeying orders issued by the church's US headquarters. "A clear inference can be made that this course of action was taken as a deliberate decision (by the US church) not to produce the auditing file," he said.

In the days leading up to McBride's death, church members tried to contact him repeatedly on his mobile phone, and sent text and voice messages mentioning an "audit" and "LRH" -- a reference to Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard.

The coroner said it appeared he had expressed a wish to take a break but until then had enjoyed only positive interactions with the church. "It is clear to me that the degree of forcefulness and amount of contact from church members over those few days is indicative of something more than concerns about completing an administrative process at the completion of his course," Mr Lock said.

Australian Church of Scientology spokeswoman Vicki Dunstan said the audit file was returned to the "mother church" in the US before the Australian church had received a request from the coroner, but said the file did not shed any light on McBride's state of mind or cause of death.

The coroner found that McBride's suicide was not "reasonably foreseeable" by his family, the Australian Defence Force or members of the Church of Scientology.

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