

A 15-MONTH investigation by the Department of Veterans Affairs into a Vietnam veteran's entitlement for disability benefits led to his suicide last year by self-immolation, say his widow and old army mates.

On July 5 last year Gary McColley, 57, walked from his Burleigh Heads home, stood on the side of a busy road, emptied a can of petrol over himself and lit a match.

Queensland police said motorists reported seeing a "tree on fire" as they passed along the Gold Coast thoroughfare.

The appalling manner of McColley's death has brought a new focus to Vietnam veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, the manner in which Veterans Affairs investigates allegations of fraud and the state of army records. While the department will not say what triggered its investigation, it's understood questions about his war record were raised by another veteran.

McColley's widow, Karen, and his army colleagues, say the department's lack of compassion and its investigation into his service record was the main factor in pushing the former signaller over the edge.

Deemed totally and permanently incapacitated by PTSD, McColley was receiving the highest veterans' pension, however, an error in army records listed him as a cipher operator, not allowed to leave base, rather than a combat radio operator. Mrs McColley told The Australian her husband's army mates said his death had been a protest based on the suicide in 1963 by Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Quan Duc.

"He'd doused himself with petrol, which the guys told me was a protest against the government, like the monk's," Mrs McColley

said.

"The police told me what he had done and apologised because they couldn't ID him."

McColley served in Vietnam during 1971 as a radio operator attached to 104 Signals Squadron and saw active service on patrols outside the main Australian base at Nui Dat. He also took part in Operation Overlord, known as the Battle of Long Khanh.

As well as PTSD, he suffered depression and had attempted suicide on a previous occasion.

He was also a forceful advocate for Vietnam veterans' rights and an office bearer of the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia.

"He was a shit-stirrer but a shit-stirrer for the vets," said his former sergeant Ken McKenzie.

Mr McKenzie backs Mrs McColley's claims the department's investigation of his war service record was unjustified.

"I'm really sure DVA don't have a case. My gut feeling is he's got a bum deal.

"Whether he's done himself any favours along the track, I don't know but I don't think he's been given a fair go."

Veterans Affairs Minister Alan Griffin said McColley's death underlined the urgency of reforms under way in the department. "Cases involving more vulnerable clients have further reinforced the importance of the new procedures that are now in place," he said.

"Greater emphasis is placed on a preliminary assessment to ensure that only appropriate cases proceed to formal investigation and that veterans are not needlessly contacted." But army records were "at times" in error or missing key information. "While the records obtained from Defence for the

purpose of assessing claims are generally reliable and accurate, at times there can be errors or missing information due to the age of the material," he said.

Veterans groups, of which there are about four, say dozens of former servicemen suffering PTSD have killed themselves, but many families are too ashamed to speak about it. In 2006, veteran Michael Heffernan shot himself inside the department's Melbourne head office.

The day before her husband's funeral Mrs McColley received a letter from Veterans Affairs affirming he had been paid his correct entitlements.

A copy was placed in his coffin.