

Defence to deal with its alcohol, drug abuse culture

By Dan Oakes

17 January 2011 – 3:00am

THE Defence Force is moving to tackle the rising incidence of drug and alcohol abuse within its ranks, after a year marred by several serious incidents linked to it.

Defence placed advertisements in newspapers over the weekend, seeking alcohol, tobacco and other drugs co-ordinators to work in locations across Australia to help those among its 57,000 members abusing substances.

Last February the Chief of Army, Ken Gillespie, attacked the culture of alcohol abuse within the army, telling the *Herald* that alcohol-related misadventure killed more Australian soldiers in 2009 than were killed in Afghanistan that year.

He threatened to throw out of the army anybody convicted of an alcohol-related crime, and warned officers that they would be held responsible for the conduct of their men.

However, last year was a bad one for Defence's reputation on substance abuse. In April, the *Herald* reported that a Defence basketball tournament held at Bandiana barracks, near Albury, had descended into drunkenness, crude initiation ceremonies and sexual harassment.

In June an Australian soldier allegedly overdosed on an opiate in his quarters at the main Australian base in Afghanistan. The investigation into that incident continues almost eight months later.

After the overdose, the *Herald* revealed that four - and later a further three - special forces troops had been sent home from Afghanistan in disgrace after testing positive for anabolic steroids. Last month it emerged that the Australian Defence Force Investigative Service and NSW Police were investigating a large group of sailors, based at HMAS Kuttabul on Sydney Harbour's Garden Island, on suspicion of being members of a broad drug distribution ring.

Raids on sailors' quarters on Garden Island in December found a range of illicit drugs, including steroids, ecstasy and possibly cocaine.

Some soldiers resent attempts to curtail alcohol consumption, viewing their behaviour as larrikinism and a reward for the long stints they spend overseas or confined to bases. Some cities, such as Darwin, have become infamous for soldiers' drunken misbehaviour.

But General Gillespie said recently that he saw the effects of drunken behaviour on an "almost daily basis", and that the army was about to embark on a fact-finding exercise about the extent of alcohol use in its ranks.

"In the post-Vietnam era, when Defence's budget was significantly decreased and the army's public image had slumped in the wake of the perceived failure in Vietnam, the leadership in my then organisation spent far too much time at the bar ... and too often I was with them," he said.

"The army has been one of Australia's most important national institutions to condone, if not actively promote, a drinking culture. This is a culture we are very determined to change."

The positions advertised over the weekend are based in Townsville, Canberra, Sydney, Perth and Darwin, and pay between \$69,642 and \$79,555 a year.

They entail setting up an alcohol, tobacco and other drugs "program" in the region, and assisting health workers who are treating personnel with drug and alcohol issues.

Fairfax Media

Source: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/defence-to-deal-with-its-alcohol-drug-abuse-culture-20110116-19sly.html>