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Royal commission: Army school Commander 'should have known' abuse taking place

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Photo: Justice Peter McClellan (Centre) was told the abuse was kept secret and never reported. (AAP: Jeremy Piper)

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The chair of the child sex abuse royal commission has probed a former Commanding Officer about his knowledge of physical and sexual abuse at an Army Apprentices school in the 1970s.

Former Commander Alan McDonald, told the royal commission in Sydney that he was not aware of any physical or sexual abuse of teenage boys at the Balcombe school in Victoria until a former apprentice wrote to him in 2013.

The chair of the commission, Justice Peter McClellan, on Friday suggested to Mr McDonald that he should have known what was happening.

"But you were the officer in charge of the establishment?" Justice McClellan said.

"You should have known of these problems shouldn't you?"

Mr McDonald replied: "Why do you say that?"

"Did you, Your Honour, know all that your children did?"

Mr McDonald said the abuse was kept secret and never reported.

"They kept it to themselves because if they reported it they would get worse treatment," he said

"One of them went to the hospital and said he fell over jumping a fence."

'I was shocked' listening to abuse survivor stories, McDonald says

Mr McDonald said he was shocked to find out about the abuse because he "didn't really know that it [had] existed".

"Listening to the ex-apprentices that have been brought here to tell their story, I was shocked," he said.

"I didn't know that [it] had occurred.

"I was really saddened to hear the stories."

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is [hearing evidence of the experiences of men and women](#) who were sexually abused as children in certain divisions of the Australian Defence Force.

On Thursday, the commission heard from four former Balcombe apprentices.

They told a hearing they were physically and sexually abused by other apprentices and employees at Balcombe School.

One of them, Daryl James, spoke about his own experiences of abuse.

"I kept cleaning myself up, until finally the bleeding stopped," he said.

"I went back to my bedspace, made my way the best I could in the dark.

"I went back to sleep, frozen, and very home sick."

System 'failed some of those boys'

Under questioning Mr McDonald acknowledged that the management system at Balcombe School failed on some occasions.

"It's obvious that it failed some of those boys," he said.

"No-one would want that to happen but it obviously did."

The former Commander said he was aware of some initiation practices, but he could not remember what they were.

He said he was aware of one case where five apprentices attacked one of the junior apprentices.

"It was dealt with and I recommended they be discharged from the Army and within seven days they were discharged," he said.

The hearing continues.

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Army criticised over abuse at Balcombe

The royal commission also took evidence about the Army Apprentice School at Balcombe on the Mornington Peninsula, south-east of Melbourne, which operated as a training base between 1948 and 1982.

About 5,000 apprentices between the ages of 15 and 19 were given general education and trade training.



Photo: Commission chairman Justice Peter McClellan heard evidence about abuse at Blacombe. (AAP: Jeremy Piper)

Five people gave evidence to the commission about their experiences of "severe" sexual abuse — including fondling of genitals, forced masturbation and anal penetration with an object, such as a broomstick.

The abuse was perpetrated by senior apprentices and, in some cases, staff members.

The seniors created an intimidating environment for the juniors, who saw them as "gods" and quickly learned to do what they were told.

The commission said it was satisfied there was an unofficial "rank hierarchy" which was known by staff, and that the abuse continued unchecked.

Juniors were also subjected to "bastardisation" — such as being made to "run the gauntlet" during which they were punched and kicked.

"This failure to adequately address harmful bullying conduct and the culture of intimidation by older apprentices and staff represent a failure in the duty of care of the Army to provide a safe environment for junior apprentices at Balcombe," the report found.

Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-22/royal-commission-says-abuse-at-hmas-leeuwin-base-widespread/8831772>