

Blackballing and blanket beatings: decades of abuse at defence training school revealed

Major inquiry finds Australian Defence Force knew or ought to have known about catalogue of institutionalised assaults on teenage boys

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Leeuwin barracks, where the inquiry found more than 200 cases of abuse. Photograph: ABC

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) knew or ought to have known that, for decades, hundreds of young boys enrolled in a defence training school were being physically and sexually abused – often by staff – a major inquiry has found.

It also revealed [Defence has made payments of more than \\$4.6m to the victims](#), with 95% relating to the most severe categories of abuse, and all including extra payments for “Defence mismanagement”.

The Defence Abuse Response Taskforce (Dart) – whose report was tabled on Wednesday by the defence minister, David Johnston – accepted as true [allegations of abuse made by 207 former young recruits of HMAS Leeuwin](#) at Fremantle, Western Australia, however it stopped short of recommending a royal commission.

The violent and serious abuse, which occurred throughout the training school’s history from 1960 until shortly before it closed in 1984 “was much more serious and widespread than has been previously acknowledged,” Dart’s chair, Len Roberts-Smith wrote in the report’s foreword.

“[Dart] also finds that the pattern of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin was such that Defence knew or ought to have known the abuse was occurring, and yet failed to take appropriate action on it.”

Recruits cultivated their own hierarchy at Leeuwin, progressing every three months when a new intake came in, which the report noted often led to abused recruits becoming abusers.

The report contained such a large number of differing but frequently occurring specific abuses that a glossary was provided, explaining the names of acts as they were known among recruits. Forms of physical abuse included “blanket beatings” and being scrubbed until they bled.

The effect on victims was profound. They include immediate and long-term physical and psychological injuries, destroyed careers and relationships, addictions and substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.

Dart was set up in the wake of the so-called “Skype scandal”, to assess and respond to abuse allegations within Defence, and has so far received about 2,400 allegations, of which 238 related only to Leeuwin.

Virtually all the complainants were junior recruits aged 15 to 17 at the time and many were victims of multiple forms of abuse endured over months.

Almost half of the 207 complainants were subjected to sexual abuse, 89% to physical abuse, 77% to bullying or harassment, and 8% to sexual harassment. A “significant majority” suffered more than one type of abuse.

“In the first few intakes it was largely staff members who were responsible for the abuse,” the report said, but it later added this soon led to recruit-on-recruit abuse.

Staff often turned a blind eye and a “culture of silence” as well as fear of retribution prevented many victims from reporting assaults, the report said.

In every case where a complainant was found to have been abused, at least one instance of Defence mismanagement was also found.

Few victims reported it – 153 people told Dart they were abused multiple times and told no one – but those who did told parents, sponsors or staff members including sick-bay staff and chaplains.

Dart found “a small number of cases” where the reports were dealt with appropriately by Leeuwin staff, but at least 40 victims indicated no action was taken and some recruits said they were told not to proceed with their complaint or were punished after reporting.

Among the accounts of mismanagement is an allegation that a chaplain responded to a report of sexual harassment by telling the recruit it was “all part of our training”. Others were told to “fight back and be a man”, or that it was “character building”.

A number of redress options are available through Dart, but only 37 complainants have taken up an offer of a referral to a counselling program.

Staff abuse centred on discipline

Staff were reported to be behind half the instances of bullying, a third of physical abuse complaints not including instances of enforced fighting, and 38% of sexual assault cases.

On a few occasions the abuse was by “sponsors” who hosted recruits on weekend leave.

Much of the staff-related abuse centred on inappropriate discipline methods, including “running the gauntlet” of physical abuse and solitary confinement several times, as punishment for running away from Leeuwin after they had been abused.

The report also heard seven instances where staff members denied or provided inadequate medical treatment to victims “in circumstances which the taskforce has assessed amounted to physical abuse”.

Recruits formed a hierarchy at Leeuwin, which changed every three months when a new intake came in, which the report noted often led to abused recruits becoming abusers.

The newest students were referred to as “new grubs,” progressing to “grubs,” then “shits”. The most senior recruits were known as “top shits” and would run initiation and hazing practices. Any junior recruit who resisted the informal hierarchy or opposed the bullying or abuse was known as a “trout” or “mouth”.

“These terms were accepted by all members of staff, both sailors and officers alike,” said one complainant.

“It wasn’t just a case of boys being boys, it was an inbred culture at this establishment.”

The report contained such a large number of frequent, specific abuses that a glossary was provided.

Among the complaints to Dart, “blackballing” or “nuggetting” was the most common form of sexual abuse carried out by recruits, and referred to a boy being forcibly held down “while boot polish, toothpaste or another substance was forcibly smeared on his genitals or anal area, sometimes with a hard brush.”

The term “filled-in” referred to being physically assaulted or beaten, while “sadie-ing,” also known as “vacuuming” was the forced application of a vacuum cleaner to a recruit’s genitals. Recruits were also subjected to various forms of physical abuse, including “blanket beatings,” and being scrubbed until they bled.

No royal commission necessary

Despite repeated calls for one from the victim support sector, the taskforce did not recommend a royal commission into abuse allegations at HMAS Leeuwin.

“A royal commission may not necessarily result in a broader understanding of the nature and extent of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin than is provided in this report,” it said.

It was also noted that many of the more serious allegations raised by the report fall within the terms of reference for the current royal commission into institutional responses to child

sexual abuse. A copy of the Dart report will be provided to the current commission, and Dart “stands ready to fully cooperate” with it if requested.

Any call for a royal commission on other categories of complaints would be considered in future reports, said Dart.

The chief of the defence force, General David Hurley, has previously dismissed calls for a royal commission, claiming it would [do victims more harm than good](#), a concern also noted by Dart.

The royal commission told Guardian Australia no public hearing into Leeuwin has been confirmed.

Roberts-Smith acknowledged that the ADF is working through a period of “significant and vital cultural change”.

“The taskforce recognises that much has changed with Defence since HMAS Leeuwin was closed ... However, the fact that abuse has continued to occur in some recruit and training establishments, as well as Defence more broadly, means that Defence should continue to take active steps to prevent, stop and respond to abuse,” the report concluded.

Hurley said in his provided response the content of the report was “abhorrent” and the abuses discussed have “no place in the Australian Defence Force”.

However, he noted the allegations were historical and do not reflect the “values and standard of behaviour expected of all ADF members today”.

“I and the senior leadership group are committed to continue to address inappropriate behaviour and attitudes, and align Defence culture with that expected by our society of a modern military force,” he said.

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