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‘Grow up — that’s life in the navy’: Abuse rife at Fremantle HMAS Leeuwin base

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The royal commission found brutality was widespread at Leeuwin. Picture: WA News

The royal commission report into historic abuse at Fremantle’s HMAS Leeuwin has found sexual assault and brutality was widespread at the institution and the navy failed in its duty of care to children.

The findings have been welcomed by victims, but former cadets say they will live with the mental scars of their experiences for the rest of their lives.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found assault of child recruits was common at HMAS Leeuwin from the 1960s to 1972 because of institutional failings at the base.

The report detailed how bastardisation was commonplace as a rite of initiation but also gave details of serious rapes and sexual assaults.

One cadet told how he was raped with a broomstick, while others told how they were held down and had their genitals punched and fondled or smeared with boot polish. Bob Hill, now 68, told *The West Australian* how he had been gang raped by a group of older cadets at HMAS Leeuwin at the age of 16 in 1965.

Mr Hill, who left his family to travel across the country to attend the training base, says when he tried to raise the assault with senior officers he was simply told to toughen up.

“He (the officer) said ‘Grow up — that’s life in the navy’,” Mr Hill said.

HMAS Leeuwin was a junior recruit training base from 1960 to 1984. Over that time it accommodated about 13,000 boys aged 15 and 16.

The royal commission detailed how the worst of the abuse occurred in the 1960s until, in 1971, an inquiry exposed discipline problems at the base but exonerated officers.

The royal commission said the impact of abuse on victims had been lifelong and severe, and many had found further frustrations only very recently as they fought for treatment and compensation through the Department of Veterans’ Affairs.

During hearings this year, Vice Chief of the Defence Force Ray Griggs accepted there was a failure of management at HMAS Leeuwin that had allowed abuse to occur.

The department last year lowered its standard of proof in determining claims for compensation or treatment.

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