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Royal Commission finds widespread abuse of HMAS Leeuwin recruits in Fremantle

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Photo: Senior staff members at HMAS

Leeuwin knew of and tolerated the abuse, the commission found. (ABC News)

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Abuse of recruits at the former HMAS Leeuwin base was widespread and the Navy failed in its duty of care, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has found.

KEY POINTS:

- Abuse carried out by recruits, staff at HMAS Leeuwin until "at least" 1972: report
- Impacts included serious physical injury, mental illness and suicide attempts
- Report says Army failed in duty of care to apprentices at Balcombe near Melbourne

The commission's findings — contained in its report into the Australian Defence Force (ADF) — come [after it heard evidence of forced sexual activity and violent assaults](#), which sometimes resulted in serious injuries.

It said "bastardisation" practices involving the smearing of boot polish, toothpaste or other substances on genitals or the anal area took place at the East Fremantle shore base.

The abuse was carried out by older recruits and staff at the facility from the 1960s until at least 1972.

The report said junior recruits who were abused did not report it from fear of retribution, being humiliated or discharged. They also feared no action would be taken.

The commissioners found senior staff members knew of and tolerated the abuse, and Leeuwin's system of management was "ineffective in preventing and responding to child sexual abuse".

It said the impacts of the abuse had been life-long and severe, including "serious physical injury (some of which caused long-term disability) and mental illness, suicide attempts, alcohol abuse and broken relationships".

Leeuwin was a training establishment for junior recruits entering the Navy from 1960 through to 1984.

During that time, it accommodated about 13,000 boys aged between 15 and 16.

BULLYING, VIOLENCE IDENTIFIED IN 1971 REPORT

Abuse at the base was the subject of an inquiry by Victorian County Court judge Trevor Rapke in 1971, following a highly publicised assault on a recruit.



Photo: The naval base was decommissioned in 1986 and is now known as Leeuwin Barracks. (ABC News: Jessica Strutt)

Judge Rapke found Leeuwin had been the scene for "unorganised and repetitive acts of bullying, violence, degradation and petty crime during most years of its existence".

But he concluded bullying and violence were not institutionalised, systemic or widespread.

The commission said there was a reduction in incidents after the Rapke report, but that "at least until 1972, Leeuwin's institutional environment was such that abuse was allowed to occur".

It said it accepted the ADF's submission that its response to the Rapke report was successful in reducing incidents.

The recruitment of boys through the junior recruit entry scheme was suspended in 1984 and Leeuwin was decommissioned as a naval base in 1986. It is now known as Leeuwin Barracks.

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.

HOW THE ROYAL COMMISSION PLANS TO PROTECT KIDS



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The commission also found there was insufficient night duty staff to supervise apprentices, often leaving the seniors — the "primary perpetrators of the abuse" — to supervise the juniors at night.

"The impacts of the abuse have been life-long and severe," the report said.

"They include physical injury, mental illness, stress and physical health problems, suicide attempts and broken relationships."

The report also found claimants had requests for compensation refused because the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) relied on incorrect information about the level of corroborative evidence.

Claimants — who would have been eligible for a lifetime disability pension and other compensation, such as free healthcare — were required to have independently corroborated evidence.

"We find this approach is incorrect and when applied, may have had the effect of leading a claims assessor into error," the commission found.

The DVA has since changed its policy so that providing a statutory declaration "may be" sufficient evidence.

CHANGES HAVE BEEN MADE: ADF

The ADF has issued a response to the report, saying it was committed to providing a safe and secure environment for all youth who came into contact with the organisation.

It said it had brought in "suitability screening", including Working With Children checks, a "One Cadet reform program" to standardise elements of the three cadet programs, and a Defence Youth Safety Framework in partnership with Bravehearts.

The ADF said it had also made efforts to communicate information regarding the age of consent, along with a direction that no cadet under 18 was to "receive blame for an intimate relationship with an adult".

The ADF said services provided by its Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office had been expanded to cover cadets, officers and instructors of cadets and volunteers and their families who had been affected by sexual misconduct.

Topics: [child-abuse](#), [navy](#), [defence-forces](#), [royal-commissions](#), [perth-6000](#), [wa](#), [melbourne-3000](#), [vic](#)

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