

'We were only boys': surviving HMAS Leeuwin

By **BEN LANGFORD**

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Bob Green is a survivor of abuse, and has spoken up about the culture of fear and bullying at HMAS Leeuwin. Picture: KIRK GILMOUR

Bob Green celebrated his 16th birthday in January 1964 at home in Ashfield, and the next day set off across the continent to join the navy.

When he arrived at the HMAS Leeuwin base in Fremantle, he and the other boys in the 8th intake of recruits were not celebrated for their dedication to their country.

Instead, they were told they were the scum of the earth, the lowest of the low, not fit for the navy, not fit to become men.

It was their introduction to a culture of fear.

'No person who wears the uniform of our armed forces should ever have to endure what these boys endured.' - Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Ray Griggs

This week, the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce released a special report into abuses at HMAS Leeuwin, based on the accounts of more than 200 people, teenagers when they enlisted.

It found the abuses were systematic, often perpetrated by older recruits, and the hierarchy should have prevented it.

Some stories were so horrific that sensitive souls may skip the next few paragraphs.

Boys would be punched, kicked and beaten with leather bayonet scabbards as they reported for rifle training. Dozens reported being sexually assaulted by recruits or staff, or both.

One junior recruit who joined the navy in 1963 was attacked in the toilets, pushed to the ground, gagged with human faeces wrapped in paper, urinated upon and sodomised with a mop handle.



Junior recruits at HMAS Leeuwin in 1964 when abuse was part of the culture. A young Bob Green is second from the left, back row.

Older recruits dished out regular beatings.

For some, the consequences have been lasting psychological problems.

Mr Green did 12 years in the navy before coming back to the region where he was born and settling in Woonona. He understands he is lucky to have survived Leeuwin and thrived in the navy afterwards. He looks forward to the reunions, held every five years, this year in Wollongong.

He's a thoughtful man now and he probably always has been. But at times he has been almost blinded by rage, on account of the treatment he received.

At age 61, he decided to take his revenge on one of his tormenters, a fellow recruit who had beaten the young Bob many times.

He trained himself up for a fight, and planned to bring justice with his fists at the Leeuwin 8th intake's 25th anniversary reunion in Brisbane.

But when he tracked down the man, the ageing bully was in poor health; life had not been kind to him. Mr Green put his fists away, contenting himself with karma.

"I'm fit and healthy and he's ratshit," he said.

He is glad he didn't do anything that day, and has more respect for himself than if he had resorted to violence.

This is the bind for bullying victims - an emotional need to get even, plan the payback, resolve the hurt. But inside, they know vengeance isn't really justice, and that success and a good life are better forms of revenge anyhow. Closure is elusive.

Many who trained at Leeuwin say they were not subjected to any horrors. Mr Green says he was never aware of sexual abuse. Victims were threatened with repeat attacks if they spoke up, and usually the shame sealed their lips as effectively as fear.

Military training is tough, and young boys and men will always find reasons to have a scuffle. One veteran the Mercury spoke to said Leeuwin was milder than the treatment he received at a Catholic high school.

But looking back, Mr Green knows there were better ways of doing things. One incident in particular sticks in his mind.

Physical training was vital. One day, the 400 junior recruits were sent on a 10-kilometre cross-country run. A group of about six tried to use a short cut, but were found out.

After the race, the entire company was called to the muster ground. An officer called the dodgers out in front of the assembly. They were told to go back to their accommodation, put their feet up and relax. He then ordered all the other recruits (including young Bob) to run the cross-country again.

Of course, the six boys did not relax. But which was worse, the mass bashing that soon rained down upon them, the hour spent anticipating it, or the fact the other boys were used as the tool with which to punish their peers?

"They knew what was coming," Mr Green said. "Some of them couldn't open their eyes for days."

Early on, the newbies had to compete in a boxing tournament. Instantly, the tougher kids stood out. A pecking order was established that would last years. Mr Green - who made it to

the semi-finals - says he understood toughening-up exercises, but holding this right at the start had negative impacts.

"It was built on fear - discipline was built on fear," he said.

"I don't think that's a good way to build discipline.

"You might go to war - you want to be able to trust each other."

Go to war they did, but as this week's report found, sometimes it was the abuse at training, rather than war, that caused some men's post traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, and other disorders.

This was not the first investigation of Leeuwin. In 1971, Judge Trevor Rapke reported on abuses and bullying at HMAS Leeuwin and on board HMAS Sydney.

"The disgraceful outbursts of rabid behaviour are pernicious in their deep affect on the young sailor at an early and impressionable time in his naval career," Judge Rapke wrote. "The physical and mental damage to the victims was and is deplorable."

But he found the abuse was carried out by a few bad apples rather than being the responsibility of the hierarchy. This - and the fact that Judge Rapke was the navy's judge advocate-general - meant his report was seen by some as an inside job.

There will be no hiding from the new report.

This week, Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Ray Griggs said he was confident the culture at Leeuwin no longer existed in the navy.

"No person who wears the uniform of our armed forces should ever have to endure what these boys endured," he said.

For Bob Green and the other young recruits, the abuse was simply how things were done. It took years to realise they had a leg to stand on if they wanted to complain.

"It didn't break us; it probably made us tougher," he said.

"But a lot of kids did break. That was the life, so at that stage we didn't know. We just thought it was part and parcel of growing up. We were only boys."

<http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/2366008/we-were-only-boys-surviving-hmas-leeuwin/>