

Man worked with his army abusers for decades after horrific apprentice ritual

Daryl James tells royal commission he was assaulted in initiation ritual at army school of music on the Mornington peninsula

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Peter McClellan, head of the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse, during the commission's hearing in Sydney into the Australian Defence Force. Photograph: Jeremy Piper/AFP/Getty Images

A promising young musician who was abused when he was a 15-year-old army apprentice says he had to work alongside his tormentors until he was medically discharged.

Adelaide man Daryl James told a [child abuse royal commission](#) hearing in Sydney on Thursday of “systemic, traditional and commonplace abuse” at the army’s apprentice school at Balcombe in Victoria in the 1970s.

James, whose talent as a musician won him a scholarship to the Adelaide College of Music when he was 10, told how in his first month at Balcombe he was subjected to sexual and physical abuse including penetration with an object – possibly a bayonet scabbard.

In 1972 the young musician was looking forward to going to the army school of music at Balcombe on the Mornington peninsula, where apprentices as young as 14 would spend two years of a three-year apprenticeship.

James, who suffers from severe post traumatic stress disorder and has had surgery because of what happened at Balcombe, remembered early in his basic training a sergeant warned his class to protect themselves during “crab night”.

This was a ritual in which graduating senior apprentices victimised the new intake, called “sprog”.

James recalled that he woke at midnight on crab night to find eight seniors around his bed, who identified him as “a gay sprog muso”.

He was forced on his stomach and told: “You fucking homo sprog, don’t make this any worse by struggling.”

He saw a self-loading rifle bayonet being unsheathed and the scabbard pressed against him, and said he feared for his life.

He was stripped and painfully assaulted and someone said: “Tonight you gonna have your first period, sprog”.

The abuse continued throughout his first year and he was too scared to report it.

He said he had to work alongside his abusers during decades in the army, and the day before his discharge in 2012 a former apprentice still referred to him as “sprog”.

He reported the abuse to the Australian Defence Force Investigative Service in 2009, but they later told him they could not find relevant witnesses.

James suffered physical and psychological problems and was admitted to hospital several times.

His discharge after 39 years and 11 months came one month before he would have received the Federation Star for 40 years’ service.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) rejected his compensation claim.

James was awarded compensation by the [Defence abuse response taskforce](#) in 2014.

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