

Toxic culture has a long history

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The Australian

12:00AM April 13, 2011

I STILL have nightmares about January 16, 1973, the first day I entered the Duntroon cadets' mess for my evening meal.

Even before entering, I could hear an alien cacophony, which turned out to be the screaming of senior cadets. The "fresh meat", the new intake of first-year cadets, perversely designated fourth class, were being subjected to a tirade of verbal abuse, often highly sexualised.

"Do you masturbate? Does your sister f . . k? Are you a poofta?" the seniors barked.

It did not matter what the shell-shocked junior classman answered, he was outnumbered, outranked and could not save his dignity or confidence. The abusers had total authority on their side.

"You're a liar, Mr Pemberton," was the standard response screamed to every question.

All this transpired before you were formally required to submissively ask the senior class for permission to sit down to eat. Permission would only be granted if you achieved the impossible task of guessing their names (they hid their name tags) and ranks. "No! Wrong! Sit the f . . k down!"

Every fourth class, without distinction, suffered bastardisation, which lasts for much of the first year. A few weak or eccentric cadets, pack-identified as "lepers", got more of it and for longer.

It was never physical, just psychological and verbal degradation and intimidation. To the extent that it had a sexual character it was not about sex: it was about humiliation, as it was at Abu Ghraib.

It is true, this happened 38 years ago, but in my time as a tutor at Duntroon in the 1980s, it continued, taking on new forms that reflected the times. By then the practice was that the senior class fired water pistols at semi-naked "fourthies", who were forced to emulate Space Invaders, the early video game.

Indeed, as former defence minister Peter Reith told ABC1's 7.30 on April 7, the Skype sex scandal shows there is still a cultural problem within the Australian Defence Force that has not been confronted by senior management.

Complaints about bastardisation go back at least to 1969 when Gerry Walsh, a young, untenured history lecturer at Duntroon, penned a letter to the then commandant condemning it. He received no support from his colleagues. Indeed, as former graduate G. D. Solomon wrote in his Duntroon memoir, *A Poor sort of Memory*, the letter's "tone was not inflammatory but its contents highly combustible".

Walsh was unfairly blamed for leaking the letter to Max Newton, the founding editor of *The Australian*, who published it in his Canberra newsletter *Incentive*. World-wide publicity ensued.

Reading the stories as a schoolboy did not deter me and the subsequent judicial inquiry by justice Russell Walter Fox seemed to lead to a more enlightened era, although only one officer was removed and the Military Board never condemned bastardisation, which had already recommenced when I entered Duntroon four years later.

During my time at Duntroon, I read Walsh's copy of Erving Goffman's 1961 book *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, which gave me a theoretical insight into what I was experiencing.

The Canadian's book showed how this behaviour was endemic in what he called "total institutions" of any kind. Bastardisation did not

arise out of any military training necessity but because the institutions were closed and secretive and very young people wielded extraordinary and unusual authority-backed power over others.

While tutoring at Duntroon in 1983 after I left the army, another public complaint was made about bastardisation and I experienced the lack of support, even condemnation, of my senior academic colleagues when I joined Walsh in officially and publicly condemning it. Once again, however, little seemed to change.

When the Australian Defence Force Academy opened in 1986, replacing Duntroon, some hoped there would be a break with the old culture but a senior academic warned the new commandant, admiral Peter Sinclair, in writing, that there was a real risk that the old culture would infect ADFA and condemn it to being a second-rate institution. Sinclair was insistent things would change and one thing that certainly did was the advent of women.

The misogynist chauvinism of Duntroon was captured in their corps slang for women, who were described as either fugly (f . . king ugly) or grogan (excrement). When women joined the forces they were referred to by the offensive term fronts, derived from slang for female genitals. Perhaps some women embraced this culture to win acceptance but others were undoubtedly offended.

Yet despite this verbal abuse, having women in the armed services changed the attitude to bastardisation. Men who complain about bullying are often perceived as wimps but abuse of women is less socially acceptable.

In my day, when there were no women, a senior classman who repeatedly sexually assaulted a junior cadet was quietly removed from the college in 24 hours. I suspect his offence was not assault but being homosexual. There was no report of the crime and no help for the victim.

A junior cadet, unable to take the harassment any more, tied a ripped desk lamp cord around his hand and turned on the switch. He survived but was also silently removed and some cadets talked openly of him being weak. The incident was never investigated.

Notwithstanding the Skype scandal, which is more about the misogyny of the culture than bastardisation itself, the presence of female cadets and a more enlightened era makes what should have been unacceptable then actually unacceptable today.

Indeed, my experience of institutionalised bullying at Macquarie University during the past 19 years, some of which was recently reported in *The Australian*, showed me that management failure can be as great an offence as the bullying.

Defence Minister Stephen Smith and shadow minister David Johnston have been impeccable to date in expressing unequivocal disdain for the ADFA culture and the need for proper action this time. They are to be congratulated. But vested interest groups such as the Australian Defence Association need to support not hinder them. Its spokesman Neil James should know. After all, he was in my Duntroon class and saw what I saw.

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