



Bastardisation in the Military – An Open Letter from This Graduate

Bastardisation in the military has been much in the news these past few weeks, especially with the scandals at the Australian Defence Force Academy aired by the ABC on its recent *Four Corners* program.

As I watched it all unfold, it stirred up mixed emotions for me – I am a graduate of the Royal Military College (RMC Class of 1980) who is about to return for the Centenary Graduation Parade ... and yet to this point, I'd never really reflected on what we went through and why.

One of the psychologists interviewed on that program was Stephen Mugford, who I know reasonably well. I sent him an email and I've decided to post it here on my blog. Not sure why. Perhaps more as a cathartic relief for yours truly, than for your benefit.

Anyhow, perhaps it will touch you in some way ...

Hi Stephen,

it was great to see your “smiling” face on the TV after all these years.

The footage and the stories on the Four Corners program brought back a flood of memories from my time at Duntroon – some of the footage in the old RMC mess was from my era, as I recognised quite a few of the faces.

Whilst I never saw any of the extreme behaviour that was addressed by some of the case studies on the program, bastardisation was of course part of the DNA of RMC.

The thing that really struck me through the program – and this is the first time I’ve reflected on those years at RMC in a very long time – is that the institutionalised, unofficially sanctioned school-boy bullying (I think that’s really what bastardisation is) which deliberately feeds on the immaturity of cadets (a “Lord of the Flies” syndrome as it were) is so diametrically opposed to the standards, ethos and essence of what a military leadership training institution purports to be inculcating in its trainees ... that it’s actually mind-bending.

Back then, at an immature age, I was both the recipient of and the perpetrator of “bastardisation”. And I guess as I look back on it, I don’t think it’s had much of a lasting impact, although the habit of bullying was something that did take some unlearning, particularly for someone who is a strong personality as I am.

In a sense I feel somewhat robbed that my inherent immaturity was used by the military hierarchy in such an appalling way – it seems to me that “the system” failed not only in its duty of care, but in taking the opportunity to contribute more profoundly to the moral fibre of myself and my colleagues. The former has had a range of impacts from moderate to devastating on every graduate. The latter, in the cold, hard light of day, is a wasted opportunity to maximise the taxpayer’s investment in its military leaders.

The thing that you said in your interview that really hit home to me as being an absolute master stroke, was the idea of breaking the influence of the class hierarchy system and removing the virtual life-and-death control that senior cadets once exercised over junior cadets. If this is indeed happening and working, it’s a complete master stroke – I’m sure there are quite a few who hated you for it.

Breaking institutionalised military culture ain’t an easy thing. I don’t imagine you get many Christmas cards from ADFA. But it’s the right thing. It gives me great comfort to know that you’ve been involved, but I also know that there will no doubt be a long way to go with this.

Honour, loyalty, teamwork, trust ... are the stuff of which *esprit de corps* is made. They’re forged yes, under pressure and under fire but clearly “bastardisation” is not the appropriate way of applying that pressure. In my view it costs so much more than it yields, and without a doubt “white ants” rather than strengthens the moral fibre and world view of our future leaders.

Thanks for doing what you do – keep it up!

Berni Dymet

A Bit About Berni ...



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