

DEFENCE

'Culture of abuse 20 years' old'

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TWENTY-TWO years ago, I had the world at my feet. I had graduated from a prestigious all-boys school where I had played 1st XV rugby, rowed in a winning Head of the River crew, had been a school prefect and a cadet under-officer in the school cadet unit. I had also played schoolboys rugby at a national and international level. I was just the sort of young man the army wanted.

I had always been interested in a military career and the army seemed keen to have me, readily offering me an Australian Defence Force Scholarship to the recently opened Australian Defence Force Academy, where I was told I would receive military training and a first-class university education before commencing a career as an army officer.

In January 1989, I was duly sworn in as an officer cadet and flown to Canberra to commence officer training. Arriving at ADFA, I was allocated to a division and introduced to the Corps of Officer Cadets. As a 17-year-old child, I was about to lose my innocence at the hands of the Australian Defence Force.

What followed was a descent into a world of bullying and harassment that few outside the defence forces can imagine. I know I am not alone and that there are hundreds of others who have lived through the same mistreatment and carry the same scars. They are a silent

minority, and are a skeleton in the closet that the ADF does not acknowledge or talk about.

After 20 years, I can now speak out and describe the physical, sexual and psychological abuse I was subjected to, and the inappropriate culture that existed, and still lingers, in the ADF.

My experiences are something I do not readily discuss. How do you describe to friends and family what it feels like to have a gang of people break into your room at night, hold you down, beat you and anally rape you? The anger and humiliation are something you just try to live with.

After a short stay in hospital, I was transferred to RMC Duntroon to finish my military training. It was made clear to me that if I complained, my career would be irreparably damaged. I would be stigmatised by the sexual nature of the assault because homophobia was the norm and at the time homosexuality was still illegal in the ADF. Even though I was the victim, it seemed to be my fault. As a proud young male, this was difficult to cope with.

Shortly after I was attacked, the same gang attacked and gang-raped a female cadet in my division. No one was charged and nothing was done about it. One of the perpetrators said openly that "she was a drunk slut, she had it coming". That person is now a senior officer in the ADF.

At the root of the ADFA's problem was the fact that after maybe 20 months of limited military training, the senior class was given hierarchical superiority over the first-year cadets. It was no surprise that this power was ultimately abused.

It did not take too long for allegations of inappropriate conduct to surface. When the allegations could no longer be ignored, a review was commissioned into the widespread allegations of sexual harassment and bullying.

Most reviews of this type are generally innocuous and purposefully do not make any findings. The Grey review, on the other hand, conducted a thorough investigation and found that bastardisation was

rampant at ADFA, stating: "Unfortunately, some cadets at the defence academy are dishonest, emotionally stunted, insensitive bullies and cheats."

The Grey review prompted significant changes in the way things were done at ADFA. The supreme power of the senior cadets was removed and male and female cadets were segregated. The day-to-day management and training of cadets was placed in the hands of trained officers. No longer were zealous 20-year-olds with no leadership experience practising leadership techniques on, and at the expense of, junior cadets.

After I left the ADF and graduated from law school, I wrote to the defence minister and outlined what had happened to me. The ADF investigated my allegations and found there was "no record" of my allegations on my cadet file. Shortly after my official complaint to Defence, the Grey review investigated my allegations and many others and found: "On occasions, DO (divisional officers) have not kept a record of a significant incident which affected a cadet. On other occasions, a record has been kept which does not accurately reflect the true nature of an incident, or alternatively, an accurate record has been kept but it is not held on an official file. There is therefore no record of it on either the cadet's training file or an official academy file."

Unlike the half-hearted Defence investigation, the Grey review examined my medical records, which were held separately from ADFA files and which revealed hospitalisation as a result of injuries inflicted by other cadets.

With the passage of time and the cynicism of the lawyer I have become, I am not surprised that no one at ADFA carefully wrote down the details of the attack on me by a gang of serial rapist senior cadets, most of whom would go on to be commissioned officers in the ADF.

Working in criminal law, I regularly see people incarcerated for the same crimes committed against me at ADFA. However, the criminals

in my case were never brought to trial but were given commissions and careers in the ADF.

To be fair, the rapidly implemented changes at ADFA were to the credit of the ADF, although in light of the findings of the Grey review, the ADF did not really have any other choice.

Despite more than a decade of resistance, ADFA was dragged kicking and screaming into the 20th century.

Despite the changes, no one took the time to say to anyone in the ADF that what happened at ADFA prior to 1998 was wrong. No one said to any of the graduates of ADFA: "What was done to you at ADFA was wrong, what you did to other cadets at ADFA was wrong."

It is time for the ADF to recognise the damage that has been done to people and make a genuine attempt at healing and learning across the ranks of the ADF. It is time for a comprehensive program of retraining personnel at all levels of ADF in respect to appropriate standards of conduct towards each other.

I was lucky enough to rebuild my life, find a loving wife and create a career as a successful barrister. I am able to live with what happened but I know there are others who have never recovered from their experience at ADFA.

Every time an ADF harassment scandal erupts, the old wounds ache a bit. As a trained leader, I can see the root of the problem and some of the potential answers, but no one is listening.

Surely it is time for the ADF to fix itself and put an end to the human cost of flawed ADF cultural practices?

** The former cadet, who is now a barrister, has requested anonymity*

Source: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/culture-of-abuse-20-years-old/news-story/eabd49c39fe526c50756adb1786134da>