



How can we, in good conscience, send troops in to troubled regions to protect some of the world's most vulnerable citizens when it is clear so many of them can't be trusted to do the right thing at home.

Opinion: Australian Defence Force Academy should be shut down, overhauled and rebuilt from the ground up

Belinda Seeney, The Courier-Mail
December 2, 2014 10:00pm

ALMOST 20 years ago, my teenage self sat on a simple plastic chair in the middle of a sparse room at Enoggera army barracks.

On a decorated podium in front of me was an imposing panel of uniformed officers.

I'd spent two exhausting days undergoing a battery of testing – written, psychological, medical, physical and leadership – to prove I was worthy of a place at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

The final stage was a panel interview where I was grilled at length on a range of topics.

What was my understanding of ADFA's unsanctioned but widely recognised culture of hazing and "bastardisation"?

Was I strong enough to weather the ruthless and unrelenting third-year cadets who would rule over me with an iron fist from day one?

Did I realise the added pressure to prove myself given the ratio of 13 males to every one female?

My answers earned me an ADFA scholarship with guaranteed entry, a prize I eventually declined.

Many factors led to my decision but the line of questioning and casual acceptance by these officers of a ruthless and corrupt hierarchal structure certainly sat uneasily.

In 1998, when I would have been halfway through my studies, Bronwyn Grey's external review of ADFA dropped the first of many public bombshells.

The Grey Review uncovered high levels of sexual abuse, harassment, bullying and assault at the academy and a toxic culture of silence, tolerance and inaction among cadets and staff.

These damning findings should have been enough to shock the Australian Defence Force into action.

Certainly changes were made but as the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce reported just last week, none had any lasting effect.

Instead, the taskforce uncovered a sick and broken system, one with an ingrained culture of institutionalised cruelty that has been allowed to flourish unabated for decades.

The past few years have witnessed a worrying cycle: first comes the scandal, then the outrage, the review, the report, the recommendations, the condemnations, then ... nothing.

A year or two later and the cycle repeats as the defence force lurches from one abuse scandal to another.

Bastardisation to rape allegations, a humiliating Skype sex scandal to explicit and degrading emails; the details change but the brutal and relentless cycle of abuse continues.

There is an overwhelming reluctance to fix this organisation that operates as a law unto itself.

The taskforce uncovered rampant abuse not just at ADFA but throughout the entire defence force and shamefully acknowledged more than 1100 personnel accused of rape, assault and abuse were still serving.

It recommended a royal commission be established to investigate ADFA but politicians and military leaders began distancing themselves from the idea almost as soon as it was tabled.

This response is completely unacceptable and one that would not wash in any other government department or sector.

Could you imagine the outcry if we substituted “defence” with “health” and were casually informed that 1100 doctors, nurses, orderlies, medical receptionists and pathology workers were accused of atrocious acts of abuse but were still on the payroll?

What about 1100 teachers and support workers in the education sector suspected of raping and assaulting their colleagues continuing to front up to work, unchecked?

The main argument against a royal commission centres on its cost and how to justify the expense when prosecutions are deemed “unlikely”.

You know what else is hard to justify?

The cost of stripping a human being of their dignity, their free will and consent and of their safety and wellbeing.

A royal commission into ADFA does not go far enough.

Rather, a royal commission into sexual and physical abuse across the entire defence force is the only hope the army, navy and air force has to rid its ranks of bullies, rapists, predators and sadists and instigate the sweeping cultural changes it so critically needs.

ADFA, the breeding ground for arguably some of the worst instances of abuse, should be shut down, overhauled and rebuilt from the ground up before it is permitted to take in any more cadets, many who start as 17 and 18-year-olds.

The defence force is an enormous organisation and its ranks are overwhelmingly filled with admirable and courageous men and women who joined out of a sense of duty, service and national pride. However, the system they are working in is rotten at its core.

The role of Australia’s defence forces has largely become one of peacekeeping.

How can we, in good conscience, send troops in to troubled regions to protect some of the world’s most vulnerable citizens when it is clear so many of them can’t be trusted to do the right thing at home where there is greater scrutiny and visibility?

In June 2013, army chief Lieutenant General David Morrison delivered with cold fury his now-famous speech where he pledged to rid the army “of people who cannot live up to its values” and called on his troops to “show moral courage and take a stand”.

“The standard you walk past is the standard you accept,” he warned.

Now is the time to stop walking, to stop pretending that the culture of abuse in our defence force is anything other than unacceptable and wholly disgraceful.

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Source: <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/opinion-australian-defence-force-academy-should-be-shut-down-overhauled-and-rebuilt-from-the-ground-up/news-story/53b0e1847a2cac649c65bec140c2c6dc>