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It's HMAS Sex-cess

- LES KENNEDY

ROYAL Australian Navy representatives have travelled to New Zealand to investigate allegations sailors were involved in drunken displays of public nudity and an alleged drink spiking.

The New Zealand probe is the latest allegation of misconduct by Australian sailors abroad.



A Commission Inquiry is investigating allegations of harassment of HMAS Success crew. *Photo: Defence Department*

It comes as a Commission of Inquiry in Sydney investigates allegations of drunken, predatory sexual behaviour, harassment and intimidation of female crew of the supply ship HMAS Success - the flagship of the nation's fleet.

Defence Minister John Faulkner ordered the independent inquiry after an internal investigation was found to be biased. And it comes as the Defence Department cracks down on Defence Travel Cards - used by Australian military to pay for accommodation and food abroad - as evidence of rorting emerges.

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At the heart of the Commission of Inquiry is HMAS Success's 2009 tour through Asia. What began as a goodwill cruise was peppered with alleged unsavoury incidences.

The inquiry has heard the cruise began on April 4, 2009, with the 220 crew, including 30 women sailors, sailing from Darwin. Sixteen of 30 sailors randomly breath-tested after a night out in Darwin blew over the navy's 0.02 alcohol limit, including a senior female sailor. The woman, a whistleblower witness to the inquiry, said her alcohol reading was three times the legal limit.

To many observing the hearings, the voyage - in which five male sailors were sent home before the ship returned last June - resembled more of a holiday party cruise, with each port of call greeted by drunken displays and sex between crew members on and off the vessel.

At least two junior female sailors allegedly complained to two other senior female officers of having forced sex. But in the end they said it was consensual to make those harassing them "go away". One told of having sex in a hotel room on shore in Hong Kong with a senior sailor while the other said she woke to find a male sailor in her bunk on board.

On April 9, in Manila - the first overseas port of call - there was an incident in the Hobbit House Folk Bar and Restaurant. The female whistleblower alleged crew drank pure alcohol shots and a drunken sailor had accosted her asking what "bounty" had been put on her. That referred to a "sex ledger" in which bets were made by male sailors on which female crew they could have sex with.

The ship set sail for China, arriving in Qingdao on April 19. It was there, in the LPG Bar, that a male and female sailor are alleged to have had sex in front of patrons and ship's crew - one of whom allegedly videoed it on a mobile phone.

There were also reports of some crew running drunkenly through a hotel in Beijing in their underpants, banging on doors, before the vessel departed for Hong Kong on April 26.

During the six-day stopover in Hong Kong, a series of assault and harassment allegations emerged. Five sailors went to hospital after collapsing on Fenwick Pier before they could board the ship after a night out in what was dubbed "the KFC bucket incident" - food poisoning - but what the inquiry heard was more likely "extreme alcohol poisoning".

Before weighing anchor for Singapore on May 5, four male sailors were sent home to Sydney as allegations of the sex betting ledger emerged. One female sailor alleged she had been grabbed by the throat by a male sailor.

The inquiry was told by the whistleblower that a male sailor had complained about the transfer of one of the men. "He said: 'He should not be removed because he has a lot of other women on board to f--- before the end of the tour'," she said.

In Singapore, a fifth male sailor was sent home amid allegations of a sex act performed on a table before the vessel arrived.

The ship's commander, Captain Simon Brown, told the inquiry that, after transferring the sailors, he told senior crew "the ship is broken" and its "rotten core" needed to be removed. Yesterday the Defence Department declined to comment. A spokesman for Mr Faulkner said he was not aware of the New Zealand allegations, adding "we do not comment on ongoing investigations because it could jeopardise inquiries".

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