

Lurid details from report on Navy ship

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February 25, 2011 11:30pm

CANBERRA: Even by the low standards of drunken Australians misbehaving in foreign places, what occurred in the Chinese port of Qingdao on Anzac day 2009 seems exceptional.

There in the LPG Bar in public view, a sailor from the supply ship HMAS Success was having sex with a younger female sailor. There were differing accounts as to whether this occurred on the pool table or on a couch in the corner.

But occur it certainly did, concluded retired NSW Judge Roger Gyles.

What's more, other sailors in the bar were summoned to watch. It may even have been filmed on a mobile phone.

In a hard-hitting report, Judge Gyles concluded that this was a pivotal event in exposing a toxic culture on HMAS *Success* whereby a group of senior sailors engaged in predatory sexual and drunken misconduct, protecting themselves through mutual silence and intimidation.

At the time, *Success*, with her crew of 220 including 30 female sailors, was on a two-month voyage around Asia, participating in exercises and showing the flag during various port visits.

Next stop was Hong Kong.

Judge Gyles said the lack of consequences for the Qingdao miscreants could only have produced a feeling of immunity and emboldened them to run amok in Hong Kong.

“And that is precisely what occurred,” he said.

One crewman described the ensuing three days as “the biggest pissup I've ever been in”.

On three evenings, groups of sailors visited bars in fancy dress. One was described as “robe run” where participants dressed in hotel bathrobes, at least one sans under

garments.

On night three, junior sailors wore Snow White costumes comprising lycra suits and frilly dresses while senior sailors wore schoolgirl outfits.

One sailor not part of this group was threatened with violence when he objected to a Snow White stripping down to underpants on the dance floor.

This prompted further complaints.

As it became known that top level action was pending, there appears to have been threats designed to silence the complainants.

All this would have been bad enough but it was simply the latest chapter in a rich history.

In Cairns in October 2008, two sailors had been arrested for causing a public nuisance. Police had to subdue one with capsicum spray.

In Manila, on the first stopover of the fateful voyage, alcohol flowed freely and two bars were damaged. There were suggestions of senior sailors having sex with young female sailors in a hotel.

In Qingdao, one senior sailor had drunken sex with a 19-year-old female sailor actually aboard *Success*. She was subsequently sent back to Australia.

The Gyles inquiry uncovered evidence that a "bounty" had been placed on her, in the form of a reward for any sailor who had sex with her.

"Given that, the incident takes on a more sinister complexion," Judge Gyles observed.

After Hong Kong, there was a succession of complaints, somewhat to the surprise of Fleet Command back in Australia which had judged *Success* to be operating well. It despatched an "equity and diversity tiger team" who sailed aboard her from Hong Kong to Singapore.

Their report, detailing a predatory culture, was damning. It led to three sailors, allegedly the ringleader and his henchmen, being marched off the ship and flown back to Australia in circumstances which, Judge Gyles said, denied them natural justice.

All this might have passed below the public radar were it not for Seven News which detailed key incidents aboard *Success*, with additional lurid claims of a document known as The Ledger.

In that, sailors allegedly placed dollar values on sex with female sailors.

Larger sums were offered for sleeping with an officer or a lesbian, with challenges to have sex in various locations, including on a pool table.

Judge Gyles was appointed to get to the truth and conducted hearings over 46 days last year, taking evidence from more than 100 witnesses. Part one of his report was released this week.

His findings were also damning. Defence head Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, Navy Chief Vice Admiral Russ Crane and Defence Minister Stephen Smith all agreed they made uncomfortable and confronting reading.

Judge Gyles concluded that the crew's behaviour was out of control and discipline had broken down while they were visiting the Asian ports.

``There was evidence of predatory sexual behaviour," he said.

He also found a culture of mutual protection through silence and intimidation.

Judge Gyles found no evidence of a sex ledger but concluded the longstanding fiercely tribal and protective culture of a select group of sailors meant it was most unlikely the whole truth had emerged.

So The Ledger may never have existed or it may be on the bottom of the South China Sea.

The report names names but all have been blacked out of publicly released copies. Judge Gyles made no recommendations for disciplinary action.

However, an audit by a senior lawyer identifies 26, including officers and senior and junior sailors, who could face further action. Vice Admiral Crane has promised people will be held to account.

Overwhelmingly Judge Gyles sheets home the blame to a core group of senior sailors - including petty officers and chief petty officers - from *Success's* marine technical department, essentially the engine room.

So what is it about *Success* - an 18,000 tonne French-designed Durance class oil tanker and replenishment ship launched in 1984 - that allowed such a culture to develop.

Fundamentally, it's because *Success* is a one-of-a-kind vessel in the Australian navy with mechanicals unlike anything else in service. So those who knew how to make the ship go stayed for long periods.

``A toxic sub-culture grew up and flourished among a small group, nurtured essentially by a leadership failure because the senior sailors who should have been setting the example were in effect encouraging and condoning the behaviour then covering it up," said Australia Defence Association executive director Neil James.

The navy has weathered a succession of well-publicised incidents of misconduct.

Following complaints that women sailors aboard the destroyer escort HMAS *Swan* were sexually harassed in 1992, there was a broad-ranging review of processes for integrating female sailors into this traditionally all-male domain.

That prompted a defence-wide commitment to do better, which has mostly worked, with more female sailors going to sea and on operations, most with no adverse experience whatsoever.

In April 2009, Navy Chief Vice Admiral Russ Crane launched the five-year New Generation Navy scheme to achieve further cultural reform and defence's response to the *Success* report will occur under the umbrella of this program.

Vice Admiral Crane described what happened on *Success* as unique in his 40 years in the navy, which included two years in command of *Success*.

``This is an extreme example of of an unacceptable culture that had developed in a unique part of our navy and not one I have seen mirrored in other parts of the navy in my visits to either fleet or shore establishments," he said.

Air Chief Marshal Houston cites two key issues - leadership and booze.

He said the bulk of problems on *Success* stemmed from leadership failure.

``This led to a breakdown in discipline that led people to believe that there would be no consequences for their behaviour," he said.

But, Judge Gyles noted, alcohol consumption featured in every untoward incident. Defence is now working on a comprehensive alcohol management strategy.