

Abuse in the military: running with a pack of wolves

The Drum

By [Andee Jones](#)

Posted 23 Jan 2012, 6:58am Mon 23 Jan 2012, 6:58am



Photo: To some men in the ADF, women are always the enemy even when they are on your side. (ADF) (ADF)

I was called things like ho, front bum, whore, slut, useless sheila and the word starting with 'c' that I don't say. There were times when I was threatened with physical violence.

This is a female soldier, who served with the Australian Army in East Timor, [describing](#) how she was treated by fellow soldiers. (SMH, Jan 7, 2012)

In April 2011, after the so-called Skype sex scandal at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), Defence Minister Stephen Smith appointed Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick to inquire into the treatment of women in the Australian military.

Corporal Ellissa Smith claimed to have endured daily bullying in the ADF for nearly a year. The bullies, Smith said, "were trying to get me to put my discharge in". Smith was one of many women, according to Broderick, who stuck it out in a long, slow campaign to build defence careers despite a hostile culture. Previously, a fellow soldier had drilled holes in the ceiling above Smith's bathroom and bedroom in the barracks and secretly spied on her for months.

There are no surprises in these kinds of allegations. The only mild surprise left is that some military men keep insisting the situation's normal - and reading that as SNAFU (Situation Normal All F ... ked Up), I can only agree.

In 2006 The Age [reported](#) it was business as usual for men cadets in the Australian Navy to refer to their women colleagues as 'Abortion' and 'Squid': 'Abortion' meaning 'someone of no value to human life', and 'Squid', that women 'are flabby, smell of fish, are easy to get into, enfold you with tentacles, and squeeze the moral life out of you'.

Something surely smells at the ADF, and apparently there's rot at all levels. Yet former air force pilot AJ Turner [said](#) of the latest inquiries that it is unreasonable to expect 'testosterone to remain dormant' when men and women are 'at the peak of their sexuality... and are together in a semi-cloistered environment'.

Run that past me again? Is this former military man saying that abuse is the likely outcome of young people at the peak of their sexuality living in close quarters? Sleepers awake! I thought a more typical result was courtship and sex - passable if you're lucky and, if you happen to hit the jackpot, mutually enjoyable. But not in the ADF apparently.

From where Turner stands, the testosterone-laden are just as likely to install secret cameras in women's showers, drill holes through women's bedroom ceilings and spy on them, and tell women they're useless and that you'll show them just how useless next time you catch them alone.

The testosterone-rich movers and shakers I know tell me they'd be mortified to be thus regarded. Maybe they're afraid to let me in on the truth - that they'd rather spy on a woman than court her. It's true that I'm a friend of the F-word variety - that is, someone who wants equality for women - and thus very scary.

Has anyone suggested to Turner and the ADF that spying is something usually reserved for the enemy, not for those who're prepared to put their life on the line for you? That men who'd rather spy on women than get to know them might be afraid of something? That they might be under the misapprehension they always have to be one up, even to the point of secretly collecting material with which to humiliate or intimidate women? That perhaps they perform mainly for their mates - particularly the ones hiding, watching, in another room?

Unlike Turner et al., I don't imagine testosterone drives the desire to humiliate women. If it does, thank god for all those men who control themselves so heroically. And thank god for one of the upsides of culture, namely that sometimes rules work, sometimes getting us to think twice before we punch someone for, say, passing us at 120km/h then cutting in and dropping to 80.

It's a shame that culture also has its downsides, for example, that practices rooted in fear and hatred of the Other - particularly women - become entrenched as tacit assumptions about 'how things are and ought to be'. Men who abuse women are afraid of being seen by their mates as one down to a woman. The rules of patriarchy say there are only winners and losers, and that losers aren't real men.

In 2008 a former army officer presented top brass with a statement saying a large number of cadets and senior ADFA officers were engaging in assaults on cadets. In the statement he said he regretted not trying to stop an attack on 'X', a fellow cadet who had raised concerns about bastardisation at the academy, but that he was 'too afraid of being subjected to the same treatment'. X was bashed and sexually assaulted by a group of cadets. 'If you f ... k with us we will f ... k you up the arse you jack faggot,' they said as they shoved a broom handle into his anus. At the academy, said X, 'it was like running with a pack of wolves. As soon as you are sick or injured they turn on you and eat you'.

To some men, women are always the enemy even when they're on your side. Not only women, but certain men as well - men who don't fit the mould. The thing persecutors fear most is that their own weaknesses will be revealed and that they too will be condemned as losers and eaten alive.

Like running with a pack of wolves.

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Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-01-23/jones-abuse-in-the-military3a-running-with-a-pack-of-wolves/3786652>