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Our military has tarnished itself

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A military career is unlike any other. So, too, is its training. Every Australian Defence Force recruit undergoes extreme physical and mental hardship, to test whether they are suited to the rigours of combat and to improve their ability to perform their duties in the at-times horrific environment of war. Many personnel argue that these gruelling, even scarring, trials are crucial. They build tough bonds of camaraderie, and hone the instincts that are needed to obey orders immediately, even when to do so endangers one's own life.

Last month, a Queensland military historian, Ross Eastgate, described frankly his training, at Royal Military College Duntroon in 1968, as bastardisation - and, in a manner of speaking, went on to defend it. "It was certainly character forming," he wrote. "Bastardisation taught me things about myself and it taught me much about others ... Later, when confronted with difficult situations ... the endurance, not to mention patience, I had learned during bastardisation invariably guided my response."

However, he also added: "Not everyone survived unscathed". And that's the point. Thousands were less fortunate than Eastgate. Some military units, maybe even whole bases, remained free of violent forms of "hazing", the formalised bullying of new recruits. Yet it pervaded others. Corporal punishment became, for some personnel, part of military life. This entrenched sadism has left a terrible legacy, as is made clear by DLA Piper's report on abuse within ADF ranks over the past half century. Its investigation found it was likely "a substantial number" of former and serving personnel suffered or were at risk of mental illness caused by their abuse within the military, and were at a greater risk of committing suicide.

And accentuating this violence is the military's pervasive culture of misogyny, which it can no longer deny. The ADF has always been a brotherhood, and remained so even as the number of female recruits rose in recent decades. Male cadets at the Australian Defence Force Academy still play out an old competition to score "the trifecta": having sex with a female cadet from each of the services, a practice also known as "gaining your wings". This casual objectification of women may be legal, but it hints at a rotten culture that encourages darker acts.

We glimpsed this culture in the wake of last year's "Skype incident" at ADFA, in which a male cadet had consensual sex with a female colleague but, without her knowledge, filmed and broadcast the act to six other men. The cadet's decision to secretly film the sex was widely condemned, but just as troubling was the apparent belief, among those other cadets who watched on, that their actions were somehow okay. The then ADF chief, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, denounced the cadets' behaviour, but he added a caveat that said it all: "If you draw comparisons against similar institutions - I am talking about university campuses - I think the number of incidents of this kind is less at ADFA than any other

campus in the country." His mixed message betrayed the sad truth: that some in the ADF believe it has no special problem.

Yet DLA Piper's report reminds us, as have past inquiries, that our military suffers from far more than a cultural crisis: it has protected, perhaps even encouraged, criminality. It tells of the 2001 army survey that found one in every 25 female soldiers said they were victims of attempted rape, and one in 14 had experienced "sexual threats", such as a warning they would be treated poorly if they refused to have sex. It tells of how the 1998 Grey review of military justice identified 26 valid rape allegations over just four years, yet just two of those cases went to trial. And it warns that some of those alleged rapists of the late 1990s "may now be in 'middle' to 'senior' management positions in the ADF" without ever answering for their actions.

The DLA Piper investigation received almost 850 allegations of sexual and other forms of abuse, though a mountain of other claims were submitted after its deadline. Defence Minister Stephen Smith has now raised the prospect of a royal commission to root out the military's criminals. Yet his suggestion begs the question: why should this be necessary? Why would the ADF not immediately pass on every allegation to police, given that DLP Piper says the "overwhelmingly majority" of claims appear plausible?

The military has shown too often that it fails to act to protect the vulnerable, especially the women, in its ranks. It will now be judged by the number of its past and serving personnel that it exposes to justice. And unless it acts swiftly against the miscreants within, it allows every one of its serving members to be tarnished by the crimes - the rapes, the sodomy and the torture - detailed in this latest report. We cannot allow it to sweep these misdeeds from sight and mind, as it has in the past.

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