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Senior Defence officer: what I did was bastardisation

The DLA Piper report warned that some of the perpetrators and witnesses may still be serving in the Defence Force. A currently serving senior officer writes about his involvement in ADFA incidents.

I don't remember being an instigator, but I was most certainly a co-conspirator. It was pack mentality and I regret the behaviour. I look at it now and I can't reconcile the behaviour of me and people around me.

On reflection, if I couldn't tolerate it myself, why did I let it be done to others?

The abuses in DLA Piper are varied, from the obvious r-pe to the types of behaviour that is now simply called "unacceptable". We called it tradition, because we were told it was.

The first six months at ADFA were the worst you'd ever experienced, but if you survived you'd be all the better for it. It was even part of our indoctrination. It imprinted on you how important it was to conform, be part of the rituals and embrace the culture of ADFA. I look at what was happening, some of those horrific acts, slowly watered down over time, but still horrific acts.

Where exactly is the turning point between the people who were, six months before, sane, sensible people with the values and morals of their upbringing, yet incapable of stopping the kinds of behaviours and activities at ADFA? How did I go from being considered leadership material to being turned so easily to bastardisation as defined in the DLA Piper report?

It's the strong desire to belong. The need to be one of the boys, one of the Army-Rugby-Artists: minimal amount of academics, maximum amount of sports, and maximum amount of testosterone. The pressure to belong to that group were overwhelming, particularly as a 17-year-old.

We rationalised it as boys having harmless fun, or pranks played on people you liked, or bishing someone who deserved it. Repeatedly banging on a girl's door late at night wasn't frowned upon. If that was considered harmless fun in my time how much worse could you have gotten if those at 17 or 18 believe that this kind of behaviour was the norm?

I don't think it's the fault of those people, I think it's the fault of the system. That's not a popular view, but I have no other explanation for it.

It was a very tough time for me. I desperately wanted to fit the mould. It wasn't me, but I did everything I could to be that. It wasn't until much later that my true values asserted themselves despite the brainwashing.

How long after leaving an institutional environment like that do your own values return? For me instantly, but for others who moved into units with similar pack mentality it continued to be part the ADF.

If the public and independent inquiries determine that allowing the behaviour to continue constituted abuse, then fair cop. That's a significant chunk of the ADF.

I'm willing to accept the consequences of those actions and I hope it doesn't mean my job.

**This is an edited and approved transcript of a Crikey interview with the officer. He requested anonymity.*

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