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OPINION

Abuse is inevitable if you want a fighting military

The Drum

By [James Connor](#)

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PHOTO: As unpalatable as it might be, developing a culture that allows soldiers to kill also creates the conditions for abuse.

Developing a culture that allows soldiers to kill is a central concern of military indoctrination.

But the ADFA's Dr James Connor says the problem for the military is that the cultural practices needed for effective fighting forces also create the conditions for abuse.

A culture which ignores sexual assault, bullying and victimisation is not a culture that can survive in contemporary Australia.

The Minister for Defence, Stephen Smith, has signalled a change in course for the Australian military with the plethora of current and recent reviews into conduct and culture and, most telling of all, [an apology](#) to all the current and former members of the armed forces hurt within and by the military.

The apology itself is an acknowledgement at the highest level that the military has been doing wrong by its members for decades.

As unpalatable as it might be, to have an effective military your armed forces need to be able to kill the enemy - and the problem is that it is remarkably hard to get people to kill another person. This was apparent during and after WWII where studies showed that most soldiers did not fire at the enemy and avoided killing if they could. Since then, significant effort has been put into how you train soldiers for battle, primarily to desensitise them to the reality of a human enemy.

Developing a culture that allows soldiers to kill is thus a central concern of military indoctrination. Key components of that culture in Australia are mateship and loyalty, never 'ratting' on your mates and excluding any 'outsiders'. The problem faced by the military is that these cultural practices make for effective fighting forces, yet also create the conditions for abuse.

Mateship and loyalty born out in the Anzac and Gallipoli traditions are meant to be embodied by our soldiers. This idea of 'mates first' is fundamental in war, especially in tight knit groups - like the section or platoon. It is a truism that soldiers fight for each other, not for lofty ideologies or questions of State. Strong cohesion, this us-versus-them mentality, works for a military when it needs to fight other people.

The problem is that in training soldiers to be like this they need to be convinced that only the unit matters, that other people are inferior and less valuable than them and their mates. This view is useful (while problematic) in war, but tends to be catastrophic in peace as a culture of bullying the outsider, of refusing to 'rat on your mates' and cover-ups occur.

This bullying or 'othering' of the outsider - a person who is a bit different or a woman - is a great way to build cohesion while getting rid of the 'undesirable'. Traditionally the unwanted fails to live up to some imagined hyper-masculine white fighting figure - the supposed 'ideal warrior' type. Soldiers learn rapidly that you never want to be the victim and the way to avoid that is always stick by your mates and attack the outsider.

Part of that code of mateship is the idea of never dobbing in anyone for misbehaviour. The hated soldier is the rat who tells senior military about a wrong-doing, or worse, the rat who goes outside the military chain and tells the media or Parliament. The entrenched culture within the military that it is better to be wrongly punished than tell on your mates goes to why and how there has been such silence on the issue of abuse.

The consequences for whistle-blowers in society tend to be severe, but in the military it can literally be life and death. Some of the most egregious immoral and illegal acts by soldiers only come to light after return and stand-down, when testimony, photos or comments creep out. Yet at the time of the atrocity nothing is said or done - as you cannot be a traitor.

The problem confronting the Australian military is that 99 per cent of it is a large public service-like bureaucracy that enables a tiny front line to actually engage in combat. Front line troops might need a bit of bastardry - they need to have strong unit cohesion, an us-versus-them attitude and a willingness to kill, maim and hurt people. Problematically though, the military trains *all* recruits for this role, *all* the time - so the mentality of war permeates the actions of *all* personnel. The purpose of initial training is to strip a person of who and what they were and rebuild them into a soldier model.

This process works if you need to fight in a war but not to manage a diverse organisation in contemporary Australia. Indeed, the very cultural practices that make the military effective at war make it dangerous to its people.

Ultimately if we want a military we will have to accept that a certain proportion of people will be broken mentally and/or physically in our service - it is a consequence of what they do and how they do it.

Mitigating the worst excesses of wrong behaviour is good. However, the sting is that to be effective, soldiers need to fight for each other and the only way we get that poses serious risks for everyone else. Fierce group loyalty means the other is inconsequential, a mere target, no more real than the paper targets used to train with.

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