



Australian Government

DEFENCE ABUSE RESPONSE TASKFORCE

Report on abuse at HMAS Leeuwin

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8. Conclusions regarding abuse at HMAS Leeuwin

This report provides a disturbing account of widespread and serious abuse experienced by more than 200 Junior Recruits who trained at HMAS Leeuwin from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Complaints of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin form the single largest group of complaints relating to any Defence establishment received by the Taskforce. These accounts of abuse are particularly serious and troubling because those abused were children at the time.

There are a number of differing accounts of events at HMAS Leeuwin on the public record. While most of these accounts acknowledge some level of abusive behaviour at HMAS Leeuwin, the Taskforce recognises that there is divergence between accounts provided by complainants to the Taskforce and some other accounts. This might suggest that it is difficult to make a definitive judgment of the nature or extent of the abuse that occurred at HMAS Leeuwin. However, having considered more than 200 personal accounts of abuse along with a significant amount of other material about HMAS Leeuwin, the Taskforce believes that some overarching conclusions can be drawn.

This final section of the report:

- draws some conclusions regarding the Rapke Report;
- discusses the findings of the DLA Piper Review;
- notes some overarching conclusions that can be drawn about the nature and extent of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin;
- identifies some of the significant factors that contributed to the occurrence of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin;
- considers whether there should be a Royal Commission regarding abuse that occurred at HMAS Leeuwin; and
- considers the implications of these conclusions for ongoing efforts by Defence to address abuse.

8.1 Conclusions regarding the Rapke Report

As set out in section 2, there are a number of accounts of HMAS Leeuwin on the public record. These accounts take divergent approaches and paint a complex picture of life for Junior Recruits at HMAS Leeuwin. Most of these accounts include at least some clear reference to the types of abuse or abusive behaviours that occurred at the establishment. This is particularly the case in accounts by former Junior Recruits provided in the media and on some internet sites. There has also been some recognition by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal of a culture of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin along with a culture which discouraged the reporting of abuse.⁴³⁴ Further, the DLA Piper Review noted an environment which prevailed at HMAS Leeuwin in the late 1960s and early 1970s 'where the choice was to join in bashing and assaults on other minors or to continue to be the target of such abuse'.⁴³⁵

The only detailed formal inquiry into alleged abuse at HMAS Leeuwin prior to the work of the Taskforce was the 1971 Rapke Inquiry, which recognised that there was some bullying and violence occurring there. However the findings of the Rapke Report minimised the extent and severity of this abusive behaviour, with Judge Rapke concluding that:

[o]rganised initiation ceremonies, a formal pattern of bastardisation, or any form of patterned violence or misbehaviour have never been a part of the programme, official or otherwise, at LEEUWIN.⁴³⁶

Throughout his report, Judge Rapke's reflections on the Navy and to a large extent on HMAS Leeuwin were predominantly positive. He remarked on the 'enthusiasm for the Navy disclosed by almost every person interviewed' and cited the high retention rates of Junior Recruits at HMAS Leeuwin as evidence of the integrity of the establishment.⁴³⁷

However, in the view of the Taskforce the positive tone and findings of the Rapke Report are not supported by Judge Rapke's research as reflected in the inquiry transcripts and other supplementary documents; nor are they supported by certain parts of the Rapke Report itself.

During his inquiry, Judge Rapke heard numerous accounts of bullying, violence and abuse at HMAS Leeuwin. For example, witnesses told Judge Rapke of 'queue jacking'⁴³⁸; Junior Recruits using standover tactics to extract stamps, cigarettes or money from other Junior Recruits⁴³⁹; beatings, including with objects such as hoses and chains, sometimes with many Junior Recruits attacking a single Junior Recruit or commencing while the subject was asleep⁴⁴⁰; gauntlets⁴⁴¹; 'vicious circles'⁴⁴²; and 'forcible sexual degradation'.⁴⁴³ One witness told Judge Rapke that Junior Recruits suffered:

sexual assaults by anyone who was senior to them – (which was practically everyone) and this took many forms from simply forcing tubes of toothpaste up the back passage, blackballing, forcible sexual rape, and forcible unnatural acts.⁴⁴⁴

Judge Rapke also heard evidence of injuries including black and split eyes, facial lacerations which on at least one occasion required stitches, concussions, broken thumbs and collarbones, fractured jaws and noses, dislocations, smashed teeth, abdominal injury and paralysis 'as a psychiatric sequel to [a Junior Recruit's] injuries'.⁴⁴⁵

Despite Judge Rapke's conclusion that violence and bullying at HMAS Leeuwin were not widespread or systemic, certain comments in the Rapke Report and supplementary documents suggest that Judge Rapke had at least some understanding of the actual levels of abuse at the establishment and the semi-organised nature of that abuse. For example, in his questioning of witnesses, Judge Rapke frequently referred to a 'tradition' of bullying and violence at HMAS Leeuwin, and his Report identified a 'nauseatingly familiar' pattern emerging from the 'descriptions of other J.R.'s and ex-J.R.'s of various years'.⁴⁴⁶

Further, the Rapke Report and supplementary documents also suggest that some staff members had knowledge of abusive practices at HMAS Leeuwin at the time they were occurring and failed to take appropriate action to end these practices. At least one former Junior Recruit told Judge Rapke during his inquiry that instructors were often told about bullying incidents but declined to take action to put a stop to them.⁴⁴⁷ In other witness accounts provided to the Rapke Inquiry, officers condoned abusive behaviour. For example, Judge Rapke recounted being told by one Junior Recruit:

[S]ome lads told Division Chief Petty Officers and Leading Hands that they had run the gauntlet the previous night. The reaction of these senior sailors was said to be – "They just laughed and said 'That's just part of it, boys'".⁴⁴⁸

Judge Rapke also recounted conversations in which some staff members themselves expressed similar sentiments. At one point in his report, Judge Rapke noted that some officers 'nurtured a belief that some bloodletting was an essential part of getting a youngster into shape for Naval discipline'.⁴⁴⁹

Many reasons could be suggested for Judge Rapke arriving at the conclusions he did. For example, the transcripts of Judge Rapke's interviews indicate that many witnesses were reserved in speaking to him. However, analysis of the inquiry transcripts and other supplementary documents indicates that it was open to Judge Rapke to draw alternative conclusions. It is noteworthy that in most cases, evidence provided to Judge Rapke indicating serious or widespread abuse was not rejected by him as lacking in credibility or cogency; rather he appears to have trivialised its significance in reaching his conclusions. Even when witnesses did speak candidly or documentary evidence revealed abuse that was serious, widespread, conducted with official knowledge or carried out by staff members themselves, the Rapke Report tends to gloss over the details or attributes these occurrences to the day-to-day operation of a teaching institution for teenage boys.⁴⁵⁰

Whatever the reasons for Judge Rapke reaching his conclusions, a detailed consideration of the Rapke Inquiry documents along with the personal accounts contained in more than 200 complaints of abuse, have led the Taskforce to conclude that abuse at HMAS Leeuwin was far more serious and more widespread than is reflected in the Rapke Report.

8.2 Findings of the DLA Piper Review

The Taskforce Terms of Reference require it to assess the findings of the DLA Piper Review and the material gathered by that review.⁴⁵¹ This report considers those findings that are directly relevant to the abuse of Junior Recruits at HMAS Leeuwin. Further consideration of the systemic issues identified by the DLA Piper Review will form part of the broader systemic analysis to be conducted by the Taskforce and reported on in future interim reports.

The DLA Piper Review recorded allegations of abuse of young men and boys and assessed them in the context of previous reports into the treatment of children and young people in Defence, particularly the Rapke Report and Adams' history of HMAS Leeuwin.⁴⁵²

As outlined in section 2, the DLA Piper Review found 'all but a handful' of the allegations it received of physical and sexual assault committed against boys in Defence aged 13 to 16 years to be 'very plausible'.⁴⁵³ It made a number of findings in relation to abuse of boys in Defence, including:

- from the 1950s to the early 1980s, Defence and the Australian Government failed to put in place adequate measures to protect boys from abuse by other boys or adults in Defence, or from being drawn into participating in abuse⁴⁵⁴;
- it is certain that many boys were subjected to physical and sexual assault during the 1950s to 1970s and possibly also in the early 1980s, inflicted by other boys and/or adults in Defence⁴⁵⁵;
- many boys who suffered abuse later contributed to inflicting similar abuse on other boys⁴⁵⁶, a particularly high risk in an environment such as HMAS Leeuwin in the late 1960s/early 1970s where the choice was either to join in with assaults or to be the target of them⁴⁵⁷; and
- it is likely that boys who suffered and/or participated in abuse may have developed, or are at risk of developing, mental health, alcohol and drug problems, and associated physical health problems.⁴⁵⁸

As indicated throughout this report, complaints received by the Taskforce regarding abuse at HMAS Leeuwin support these findings of the DLA Piper Review. The Taskforce also found that many boys were subjected to physical or sexual abuse and that the vast majority of complaints regarding HMAS Leeuwin raised plausible allegations of abuse. Similarly, the Taskforce also found that some of those abused went on to participate in the abuse of other Junior Recruits, and that many complainants have experienced long term detrimental impacts on their physical and mental health as a result of their experiences of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin.

In addition to the findings listed above, the DLA Piper Review also identified factors that contributed to the risk of abuse of boys and young people in Defence. These included:

- the fact that boys and young people often lack maturity of judgment, and as a result may inflict abusive behaviour on others or fail to keep themselves out of situations where they might be at risk;
- that adults or older boys in Defence often have power over younger boys on the basis of physical strength, seniority and/or tradition;
- that over past decades the absence of rigorous character checking during recruitment and willingness to recruit former criminals meant boys and young people were exposed to people with anti-social propensities; and
- the likelihood that some people who wished to have sexual access to boys and young people sought out institutional positions in relevant parts of Defence where they could have power over, and access to, boys and young people.⁴⁵⁹

Many of the complaints received by the Taskforce from former Junior Recruits who experienced abuse at HMAS Leeuwin tend to support the first two of the above observations – that boys may inflict abuse on one another or find themselves in risky situations as a result of lacking maturity of judgment; and that at HMAS Leeuwin adults and older boys had significant power over younger boys due to a range of factors.

Further, complaints to the Taskforce suggest that a number of staff members at HMAS Leeuwin were responsible for sexual and other forms of abuse of Junior Recruits. However, despite the suggestion by DLA Piper, the Taskforce does not have information indicating that any person sought a position at HMAS Leeuwin out of a desire to have access to young people. Nonetheless, there may have been instances where this was the case and the Taskforce is seriously concerned about the high number of complaints of sexual abuse of Junior Recruits by HMAS Leeuwin staff members.

Finally, complaints to the Taskforce regarding abuse at HMAS Leeuwin do not provide information about character checking or recruitment methods for the establishment.

8.3 Overarching conclusions about the nature and extent of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin

As of 6 May 2014, of 238 complaints the Taskforce received relating to alleged abuse at HMAS Leeuwin, 211 had been assessed and the vast majority had been found to raise one or more plausible allegations of abuse. A detailed breakdown of the abuse experienced at HMAS Leeuwin by complainants is provided in section 3, Appendix D and Appendix F.

The complaints received by the Taskforce indicate that there were some marked patterns of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin, that some of the abuse was extremely serious in nature, and that the abuse had very significant impacts on those subjected to it both at the time and subsequently. As discussed above, complaints to the Taskforce suggest that the occurrence of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin was far more serious and more widespread than is portrayed in some other accounts on the public record.

The Taskforce recognises that the number of complainants is a small proportion of the overall number of Junior Recruits who trained at HMAS Leeuwin between 1960 and 1984, and that many boys who trained as Junior Recruits at HMAS Leeuwin were not abused or mistreated. Public accounts suggest that many former Junior Recruits remember their time at HMAS Leeuwin fondly, as a formative and fortifying experience that shaped their future careers, relationships and lives.⁴⁶⁰ However, for a significant number of individuals, the experiences of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin they have reported to the Taskforce have been extremely damaging, with profound detrimental impacts in the short and long term. It is also very likely that some of those who experienced abuse at HMAS Leeuwin did not come forward to the Taskforce or the DLA Piper Review – and may never reveal the experiences to which they were subjected.

The following overarching conclusions can be drawn about the nature and extent of abuse that occurred at HMAS Leeuwin from a consideration of the accounts of HMAS Leeuwin that are on the public record and contained in the numerous complaints received by the Taskforce.

Widespread abuse of Junior Recruits occurred at HMAS Leeuwin, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s

- More than 200 former Junior Recruits made complaints of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin to the Taskforce.
- The apparent widespread underreporting of abuse suggests that the actual number of Junior Recruits who experienced abuse at HMAS Leeuwin was in fact higher than this.
- Most complainants experienced more than one type of abuse and also experienced abuse on more than one occasion.
- Abuse occurring at HMAS Leeuwin continued well into the 1970s, following the release of the Rapke Report, at which time Defence was on notice that abuse was a concern within the establishment.
- The abuse experienced by Junior Recruits at HMAS Leeuwin included:
 - widespread bullying of Junior Recruits by more senior Junior Recruits, perpetrated as part of a well-established informal hierarchy;

- bullying of Junior Recruits by staff members through training or disciplinary practices that went beyond what was reasonable for 15 to 17 year old boys at the time and would not be considered acceptable by today's standards;
- a disturbing incidence of sexual abuse of Junior Recruits by their peers, including anal rape and other serious sexual assaults as well as practices such as nugging or blackballing and vacuuming;
- particularly troubling cases of sexual abuse of Junior Recruits by staff members and Navy-approved sponsors, including anal rape, forced oral sex and other serious sexual assaults;
- some sexual harassment, by both Junior Recruits and staff members;
- a high incidence of physical assaults of Junior Recruits by other Junior Recruits, including common practices such as beatings, gauntlets, scrubbing and blanket bashing; and
- some serious physical assaults of Junior Recruits by staff members, as well as other physical abuse in the form of unreasonable failure to provide access to medical assistance, unreasonable imprisonment or mistreatment while imprisoned, and forced participation in fighting.

There are patterns evident in the complaints of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin

- In the early years of HMAS Leeuwin's operation, it appears that abuse was largely effected by staff members. In subsequent years abuse began to be effected by Junior Recruits, including through retribution against individual Junior Recruits who were perceived to be responsible for group punishments imposed by staff; and through Junior Recruits reinforcing discipline among themselves, sometimes encouraged by staff members.
- Abuse was perpetuated from one intake to the next, as Junior Recruits moved from the lower to the higher intakes, as part of the informal hierarchy that existed between Junior Recruits at HMAS Leeuwin.
- Some Junior Recruits who were abused were also responsible for abusing others. In some cases they were forced to do so under the threat of violence by other Junior Recruits; in other cases they stood up to abuse by retaliating with violence; and in yet other cases, they participated in abuse of others when they reached the senior intake.
- Some Junior Recruits were particular targets of repeated or persistent abuse over time, in some cases because they were perceived to have 'dobbed' on other Junior Recruits; had stood up to abuse to protect themselves or others; or were perceived to be 'different'.
- There were a number of repeat abusers at HMAS Leeuwin, including both Junior Recruits and staff members. A number of HMAS Leeuwin staff members appear to have been responsible for repeated bullying or physical abuse of Junior Recruits, and the Taskforce heard of at least two staff members who appear to have sexually abused more than one Junior Recruit.

Defence failed to take appropriate action to prevent, stop and respond to abuse at HMAS Leeuwin

- Some of those who experienced abuse at HMAS Leeuwin reported the abuse to Defence. A small number of these cases appear to have been appropriately managed; however in a larger number of cases, reports of abuse appear to have been inadequately or inappropriately managed. Some reports were not acted upon at all, while in other cases staff members appear to have dissuaded Junior Recruits from continuing with a complaint. In some cases Junior Recruits were not believed or were punished for making a report of abuse. In other cases reports of abuse led to retribution or further abuse.
- Many Junior Recruits did not make a formal report to Defence of the abuse they experienced, for a number of reasons, including that the culture at HMAS Leeuwin did not support the reporting of abuse; the stigma and shame associated with having been abused, particularly where that abuse was of a sexual nature; fear of possible discharge from the Navy; threats or a perceived risk of further abuse if a report was made; and mistrust of HMAS Leeuwin staff members.

- It appears that Defence, specifically the Naval Officers who led HMAS Leeuwin and staff members at HMAS Leeuwin, knew or ought to have known of the abuse occurring at the establishment. Many complainants to the Taskforce reported that staff members witnessed abuse but took no steps to stop it, or that staff members encouraged or themselves effected abuse.
- Some HMAS Leeuwin staff members failed to take reasonable action to address abuse. Staff members at HMAS Leeuwin failed to:
 - prevent abuse by taking reasonable management action to address the culture of abuse within the institution, even though it appears that for many years of HMAS Leeuwin’s operation, staff members knew or ought to have known that abuse that was occurring;
 - stop abuse from occurring, through either turning a ‘blind eye’ to abuse that was witnessed, or in some cases, where abuse was perpetrated by a HMAS Leeuwin staff member to whom the person abused could otherwise have reported the abuse; and
 - adequately and appropriately respond to abuse that was occurring, including, in some instances, through dissuading Junior Recruits from continuing with a report of abuse.
- All complaints of plausible abuse at HMAS Leeuwin have been assessed by the Taskforce as containing a plausible case of Defence mismanagement. This is because the combination of the widespread nature of the abuse at HMAS Leeuwin, and the indication that staff members at HMAS Leeuwin knew or ought to have known that the abuse was occurring leads to the conclusion that Defence failed to take reasonable management action to prevent, stop or respond to abuse occurring at HMAS Leeuwin.

Abuse at HMAS Leeuwin has had serious and long lasting impacts

- Junior Recruits experienced abuse at HMAS Leeuwin that had serious impacts on their lives and careers both at the time and for many years afterwards. Immediate impacts included both significant physical injuries and psychological impacts including feelings of constant fear, isolation, betrayal and distrust.
- Many of those who experienced abuse at HMAS Leeuwin as teenage boys are still suffering the impacts today. Long term impacts of abuse have included ongoing impacts from physical injuries, severe emotional distress, ruined careers, relationship breakdowns, drug addiction, alcoholism, psychological disorders, suicidal ideation, social isolation and many others.

8.4 Significant factors contributing to abuse at HMAS Leeuwin

Throughout this report, consideration is given to some of the most significant factors that contributed to the occurrence of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin. These factors are many and varied, and include aspects of the overall culture of the establishment, issues relating to leadership and staffing, and issues relating to the facilities of the establishment. In many cases these factors were specifically identified by complainants; others have been identified by the Taskforce from the overall body of material it has considered relating to HMAS Leeuwin.

Below is a brief summary of some of the most significant factors identified as contributing to the occurrence of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin.

Leadership issues

It is important to recognise that at HMAS Leeuwin, Defence was responsible for the care of large numbers of children. As such, Defence had a responsibility to ensure that the establishment operated in a manner that facilitated the care and protection of children rather than in a manner that allowed them to be abused.

Some of this responsibility lay with the leadership of Defence, as an institution can only operate in a protective manner if it has adequate facilities and an adequate number of appropriately trained staff. In addition, Defence leadership was responsible for the policies and procedures that applied in respect of Junior Recruits at HMAS Leeuwin, including for example, the policy that they would be subjected to the same disciplinary regime that applied to adult members of the Navy.

However, some of this responsibility also lay with those leading HMAS Leeuwin at any one time. The Taskforce has not attempted to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the abuse that occurred under specific Commanding Officers, or of these officers' responses to abuse. The Taskforce acknowledges that some of the Commanding Officers of HMAS Leeuwin may have led the establishment in a manner that attempted to protect Junior Recruits against abuse and violence. However, it is important to note that each Commanding Officer had overall responsibility for the establishment and the culture that operated within it and should have taken proactive steps to prevent, stop and respond to abuse where it occurred. The widespread nature of the abuse occurring at HMAS Leeuwin over many years indicates a failure of the leadership of the establishment.

An institutional culture which enabled abuse

Cultural and social norms have a strong influence on guiding individual behaviour, including supporting and encouraging bullying, violence or other abuse. This intensifies within an institutional setting, particularly one such as HMAS Leeuwin, in which a large group of boys in various stages of physical and emotional development were living, studying and training together within a strict Navy environment.

The institutional culture of HMAS Leeuwin contributed to abuse of Junior Recruits in many ways. Complainants described features of life as a Junior Recruit which shaped this culture, including the informal hierarchy between Junior Recruits; an environment which emphasised harsh discipline and training as a normal method of ensuring conformity with certain behaviour and standards; and a culture which discouraged the reporting of abuse. See sections 3, 4 and 5 for further discussion of these issues.

Issues related to staffing at HMAS Leeuwin

The operation of a Defence training establishment in a manner that protects against abuse depends upon having a sufficient number of committed and qualified staff. The Taskforce acknowledges that many HMAS Leeuwin staff members would have been dedicated to their work and would have made significant efforts to foster an environment suitable for the young people in their care. The Taskforce has heard a few accounts from complainants of highly effective staff members whose efforts were appreciated by Junior Recruits.

However, complaints of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin along with other material on the public record suggest that HMAS Leeuwin had inadequate staffing numbers for most of the years of its operation⁴⁶¹, which appears to have resulted in inadequate supervision of Junior Recruits and created opportunities for abuse to occur. Inadequate staffing may also have contributed to an attitude among some staff members that bullying and violence among Junior Recruits were legitimate means of maintaining control.

Some staff members appear to have not been appropriately qualified for or adequately experienced in the supervision and training of young boys.⁴⁶² In many cases young sailors were responsible for supervising a large number of Junior Recruits, a task for which many appear to have been ill equipped.

Inadequate accommodation and recreational facilities

Accommodation and recreational facilities at HMAS Leeuwin were basic and inadequate, especially in the early years. There were frequently large numbers of boys accommodated together in one block, with little stimulation, a complete lack of privacy and poor security. This residential setting, combined with issues of inadequate supervision, placed Junior Recruits in an environment where they were more susceptible to experiencing, and more likely to participate in, abusive and violent behaviour.

The use of alcohol

Alcohol had a pervasive presence at HMAS Leeuwin and was used to excess by both staff members and Junior Recruits. Complaints to the Taskforce suggest that alcohol use by staff members contributed to inadequate supervision of Junior Recruits (as noted in section 3.3). In addition, complaints suggest that many Junior Recruits were encouraged to drink at HMAS Leeuwin or turned to alcohol as a means of trying to escape from or cope with abuse (as discussed in section 6). Alcohol use by Junior Recruits also heightened their vulnerability to potential abuse.

8.5 HMAS Leeuwin and the question of a Royal Commission

Under its Terms of Reference, the Taskforce must advise whether a Royal Commission into any categories of allegations of abuse within Defence is merited.⁴⁶³ The Taskforce has considered this question in relation to the abuse that occurred at HMAS Leeuwin.

The primary role of the Taskforce is to provide outcomes for individual complainants, rather than to conduct a systemic examination of the factors contributing to abuse or of the institutional response to abuse. An examination of this nature is the kind that is normally conducted by a Royal Commission. The Taskforce recognises that many individual complainants and their representatives may feel that this kind of examination is warranted in relation to HMAS Leeuwin. While fully recognising the serious, widespread and systemic nature of the abuse that took place at HMAS Leeuwin, in the view of the Taskforce a Royal Commission focusing specifically on allegations of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin may not be warranted, for two major reasons.

First, with the publication of this report, the Taskforce provides a detailed summary for the public record of the issues arising from a body of over 200 complaints regarding abuse at HMAS Leeuwin. Many complainants who came forward to tell the Taskforce their stories of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin emphasised how important they felt it was that the abuse experienced by so many boys there was publicly acknowledged. Although the powers of a Royal Commission may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional response to abuse at HMAS Leeuwin, a Royal Commission may not necessarily result in a broader understanding of the nature or extent of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin than is provided in this report.

Second, it is important to note that many of the most serious allegations of abuse occurring at HMAS Leeuwin fall within the Terms of Reference of the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.⁴⁶⁴ The Taskforce understands that some complainants to the Taskforce have also told their stories of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin to this Royal Commission. The Taskforce believes that a stand-alone Royal Commission regarding allegations of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin may not be warranted, given that a significant proportion of these allegations could be considered by the existing Royal Commission. The Taskforce has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Royal Commission and stands ready to fully cooperate should the Royal Commission decide to examine allegations of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin.⁴⁶⁵ The Taskforce will also provide a copy of this report to the Royal Commission.

Further to these major reasons, the Taskforce has some concerns about the potential impacts on some of those who experienced abuse should a stand-alone Royal Commission be established to examine alleged abuse at HMAS Leeuwin. While some of those subjected to abuse would welcome this development, others may suffer significant personal trauma as a result of reliving their abusive experiences once again.

The question whether a Royal Commission is warranted for other categories of complaints received by the Taskforce will be considered in future interim reports.

8.6 HMAS Leeuwin and ongoing efforts by Defence to address abuse

HMAS Leeuwin ceased to operate as a training establishment in 1984, seeing the end of the Navy's Junior Recruit training scheme. However, despite the fact that HMAS Leeuwin is now closed and that the most serious abuse there occurred approximately 40 years ago, the conclusions of this report remain highly relevant today.

It is important to acknowledge that most of those who suffered abuse as boys at HMAS Leeuwin are still alive today and many are still suffering the impacts of this abuse. Further, as discussed in section 7, many complainants specifically told the Taskforce that in reporting the abuse they suffered, they hoped for public recognition that the kind of treatment they experienced as children should never happen again within Defence.

Defence recruit and training establishments are among the Defence establishments where there is the greatest risk of abuse occurring, partly because they are where Defence's youngest and most vulnerable members serve.

This is demonstrated in part by the fact that complaints of abuse occurring at recruit and training establishments make up a very high proportion of all complaints received by the Taskforce.⁴⁶⁶

Consequently, this report should be read with contemporary recruit and training establishments in mind. It is important to ask the question whether the factors identified in this report as contributing to the occurrence of abuse at HMAS Leeuwin are present in contemporary training environments; and what steps can be taken to ensure that abuse no longer occurs within these establishments. These questions will be explored further in later Taskforce reports regarding complaints of abuse occurring in other Defence training establishments.

There is also much to be learned from the inadequate manner in which many reports of abuse were managed by staff members at HMAS Leeuwin; and the impact of the inadequate efforts made to prevent, stop and respond to abuse at HMAS Leeuwin.

The Taskforce recognises that much has changed within Defence since HMAS Leeuwin was closed, particularly in the approaches taken to managing and training recruits, and to managing reports of abuse. However, the fact that abuse has continued to occur in some recruit and training establishments, as well as in Defence more broadly, means that Defence should continue to take active steps to prevent, stop and respond to abuse.

<https://www.defenceabusetaskforce.gov.au/Reports/HMAS-leeuwin/Pages/default.aspx>