

Teenage recruits suffered horrific abuse at HMAS Leeuwin naval base

David Wroe

Teenage boys were subjected to an institutionalised system of horrific abuse at a former naval training base in Western Australia, a landmark report has found.

The report into the HMAS Leeuwin base in Western Australia charts two-and-a-half decades of abuse that taskforce head Len Roberts-Smith says has ruined lives and left victims wrought by alcoholism, drug abuse and relationship dysfunction.



The abuse covered by the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce report took place largely in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the victims were aged 15 to 17 but included boys as young as 13. *Photo: Vince Caligiuri*

Even for a defence force battered by repeated revelations of abuse, the HMAS Leeuwin report contains shocking revelations, concluding that sexual assault, violence and bullying were "much more serious and widespread than previously thought".

The abuse details instances of teenage boys being raped with objects and beaten until they suffered broken bones and smashed teeth.

"I was certainly shocked by first of all the extent and level of abuse over such a long period of time – and on young boys," Mr Roberts-Smith told Fairfax Media. "Remember we're not talking about men here, we're talking about young boys that were 13 upwards. That was quite horrific when we looked at the sort of abuse.

"I certainly wasn't aware of the nature of it – the higher order of abuse that was quite horrific."

In at least three cases, alleged abusers are still serving in the military.

As of June 3, the taskforce was considering whether to refer these to Defence for administrative action.

Two cases have been referred to police for possible criminal charges.

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The abuse covered by the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce report took place largely in the 1960s and 1970s.

Much of the abuse was carried out by senior recruits against juniors, under an informal hierarchy whereby those who had been at the training base longest lorded it over more recent arrivals with the tacit approval of staff.

But the litany of assaults also includes "some serious incidents of sexual abuse by staff members who appear not to have been punished".

One former recruit told the taskforce of being repeatedly sexually assaulted by one of his supervisors, a leading seaman.

The senior sailor forced the boy to perform oral sex on him, and on one occasion raped the boy anally.

In one instance, the sailor "cornered me in the shower" and assaulted the boy while another senior sailor watched on.

Another victim recalls a petty officer inserting a pole into the "rear ends of any boys who might still be asleep instead of on deck in the morning".

The most widespread abuse was carried out through the informal hierarchy of young recruits.

"The most common form of sexual abuse perpetrated by junior recruits in acts of bullying or in initiation or hazing practices was 29 complaints of 'nuggetting' or 'blackballing'," the reports states.

"This involved a junior recruit being held down by other junior recruits while boot polish, toothpaste or another substance was forcibly smeared on his genital or anal area."

Another common practice was "vacuuming" in which an industrial-strength vacuum cleaner hose was forcibly put on a recruit's genitals, often causing severe bruising.

Many cases involved rape with mop or broom handles, often with a mob of boys setting upon the victim and holding him face down.

One victim recalls: "I recall nearly blacking out from being terrified and in pain. Everyone was laughing while I was screaming with fear."

Victims have received apologies from senior Defence brass under the taskforce's "restorative engagement program".

As of May 6, 117 complainants had received reparations payments of up to \$45,000.

All victims are receiving a further \$5000 as recognition that Defence mishandled their cases.

Mr Roberts-Smith, a retired Western Australian judge, said that Defence either knew or should have known about the abuse.

"Because it was so widespread . . . we've come to the conclusion that in all of these cases, Defence either did know about the individual abuse, or certainly knew . . . that these things were happening and not only did nothing about them but allowed conditions to develop . . . in which people were actively discouraged from reporting or penalised if they did," he said.

The high-level taskforce set up by the former Labor government to examine abuse in the military following an inquiry by law firm DLA Piper, which in turn was set up after the Skype scandal at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Chief of the Defence Force General David Hurley acknowledged the report's grim findings and praised the "courage and strength" of the former recruits who came forward.

"The matters reported in the HMAS Leeuwin report are abhorrent, and it goes without saying that abuses, such as those recorded, should not have occurred and have no place in the Australian Defence Force," General Hurley said.

He said such behaviour "does not reflect the values and standards of behaviour expected of all ADF members today".

Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Ray Griggs also expressed deep regret over the abuse.

"No person who wears the uniform of our armed forces should ever have to endure what these boys endured.

"Importantly, some of those in positions of responsibility failed to intervene and consequently become part of the negative culture," he said.

"To those individuals affected, I offer the reassurance that such behaviour is not tolerated and is dealt with swiftly in today's Navy."

HMAS Leeuwin trained 13,000 naval recruits but was closed in 1984.

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