

Alleged army leader of 'Jedi Council' sex ring pleads guilty to offensive emails

Hastings Fredrickson enters plea on three offences relating to emails that allegedly showed women performing sexual acts

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Wed 6 Aug 2014 13.00 AEST Last modified on Thu 27 Oct 2016 10.54 AEDT



Australian defence force. Photograph: Bradley Kanaris/Getty Images

A former army commando, allegedly the ringleader of the so-called “Jedi Council”, has pleaded guilty to three charges relating to sending “offensive” emails among a group of military personnel, as Defence data reveals 386 dismissals from the force over the last two years.

In 2013 the Australian Defence Force (ADF) revealed an investigation into a group of military personnel who had allegedly created or shared explicit and degrading emails including images of women engaged in sexual acts, taken without their knowledge. A number of ADF personnel were sacked over the incident, and several were referred to police.

On Tuesday Hastings Fredrickson pleaded guilty in a Sydney court to three charges of using a carriage service to cause offence. Three other charges were withdrawn and dismissed.

“The charges to which pleas have been entered relate to three emails sent to a closed group of recipients in July 2010,” Fredrickson’s lawyer Peter Woodhouse told Guardian Australia. “From the plea it is conceded the content of those emails was offensive.”

Fredrickson is due to appear again for sentencing on 22 August.

“The matters have been committed to the NSW district court for sentence,” Woodhouse said. “The sentence to be imposed is, of course, a matter solely for the sentencing judge; however in my opinion the matter does not call for a jail term.”

“Both the text and images are explicit, derogatory, demeaning and are repugnant to me,” chief of army Lieutenant General David Morrison AO said as he announced the investigation into the allegations in June last year, describing them as “worse than the [Skype incident](#)”.

The women did not know they were being recorded. “They are victims here. They are not in any way shape or form part of what this group has done,” Morrison said. “They are not a group in their own right. They have been targeted by these men.”

More than 170 people were identified as “peripheral” to the group’s exchanges.

In November the ADF [sacked six members](#), ranging from sergeant to major, “in relation to the production or distribution of highly inappropriate material demeaning women, across both defence computer systems and the public internet”.

The sacked men were among more than 180 people dismissed by the ADF in the year to 30 June 2014, including 138 from the army. Most were regular army soldiers dismissed for substance abuse. Defence also sacked 28 navy and 18 air force personnel.

In total, 150 people across the three arms of Defence had their service terminated over prohibited substances. Another 19 were sacked for misconduct or unacceptable behaviour, and 25 – all from the army – for civilian offences. One permanent navy junior sailor was sacked for a civil conviction.

The numbers of dismissal were lower than the previous year, when 204 people were dismissed from the defence force.

A spokeswoman for the Defence Department told Guardian Australia: “There is a zero tolerance to any conduct in the Australian Defence Force which falls below the standards required, as was recently reaffirmed by chief of the defence force, Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin AC, prior to assuming his role in July 2014.”

In November 2012, following the so-called “Skype scandal”, Defence set up the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce (Dart) to investigate more than 2,400 allegations of abuse within the ranks of the ADF over decades.

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Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/06/alleged-army-leader-of-jedi-council-sex-ring-pleads-guilty-to-offensive-emails>