

## Defence and ADFA need to open up on history of abuse and accept royal commission

Gregory Pemberton

The government should resist calls to close the Australian Defence Force Academy in the wake of this week's powerful Defence abuse (DART) report. But it should accept its royal commission recommendation to finally understand and solve the seemingly intractable problem of entrenched abuse which dates back more than 100 years.

The widest public debate of this issue is welcome though, as a Duntroon graduate and former ADFA academic, I disagree with the claims of former ADFA lecturer Kathryn Spurling that the abuse arises from only a small minority.



Institution: The Australian Defence Force Academy is in the spotlight again with the release of the DART report. *Photo: Andrew Sheargold*

The "small minority" argument, often used to deny deeply acculturated practices, simply does not stand the test of empirical historical research. What is now widely and rightly regarded as unlawful abuse has been a widespread ADFA practice, long condoned and covered-up by senior military staff and ignored by successive responsible ministers.

It's been widely reported that abuse complaints date back as far as the 1940s. But public scandals over abuse at the Royal Military College, Duntroon – ADFA's main precursor – date back to 1913.

Duntroon was opened in 1911 in preparation for an anticipated European war and the next year had both a senior and junior class. In mid-1913 the press asked whether an "ordeal of initiation" of junior cadets was carried out "with the knowledge and consent of the Minister for Defence, George Pearce". Reading this in Kalgoorlie during an election campaign, he immediately telegraphed his department, which, in turn, directed the matter to the Royal Military College's founding commandant, Major-General Sir William Throsby Bridges. He asked his officers to "report fully what foundation, if any, the [press claims] rest on."

Based on their report, Bridges assured Pearce that, while there had indeed been an "initiation ceremony", the press reports were "exaggerated". There had been no complaints only "cheers" by junior cadets who "thoroughly enjoyed" the "ragging". Bridges dismissed it as "horseplay that caused no ill-feeling". He stressed that no officers were present or knew of the "ceremony" but he was "satisfied that the senior cadets would not permit it to be carried too far". Pearce, now in Perth, took no action.

The next year, there were again press reports on "allegations of ragging" of the next junior class and calls for the Department of Defence to "look into it". Bridges again affirmed "it does not occur"; reports of complaints being "without foundation or fact". The outbreak of war soon after, likely did not end the "ragging", but did end press interest for some years.

A less public complaint in 1940, soon after Duntroon returned to Canberra after its temporary re-location to Sydney, was handled discreetly at prime ministerial level by Robert Menzies as the complainant's father was socially prominent.

Ironically, when the "bastardisation" scandal erupted in 1969, one of the initiation rituals mentioned was of junior cadets being forced to run naked in Canberra's chilly evenings to Bridges' nearby grave and memorise its inscription, which began "a gallant and erudite soldier".

According to the academic who unwittingly initiated that scandal, the late Gerry Walsh, then minister for the Army, Andrew Peacock, sincerely tried to get to the bottom of things but the inquiry established under Justice Russell Walter Fox was weighted towards Duntroon graduates, such as Fox himself. The civilian academic on the inquiry, former South African colonel L. C. F. Turner, told Walsh how the attitude of key inquiry member, Major-General Cedric "Sandy" Pearson, also a Duntroon graduate, changed sharply to denial once it was announced he was RMC's next commandant.

In the next scandal in 1983, the few Duntroon academics, such as me, who wrote to the minister for defence, Labor's Gordon Scholes, were fobbed off with meaningless replies; again nothing substantial happened. Bob Hawke's government, preoccupied with economic reform, did not take on the traditionally anti-Labor security institutions like ASIO and the Army. RMC's commandant played down the issue in an address to the college academics challenged by only a few, including myself. We were then criticised by the senior academics.

From 1986 ADFA merged the intakes of the three existing service colleges, including Duntroon. There was hope of a fresh start, especially with the recruitment of women. This proved a false dawn.

Viewed in this historical context, 2011's ADFA-Skype scandal was just the latest link in an unbroken 100-year chain of military abuse. That the weight of a century hangs heavily in defence of this culture is demonstrated starkly by some of the Duntroon-ADFA graduate community who have expressed, more privately than publicly, their hostility not to the abuse but to those like former Labor defence minister Stephen Smith, and myself, who have dared to voice public criticism.

ADFA, like Duntroon, is an outstanding national institution with a great history and a greater future. It can and should be reformed. The keys are transparency, accountability and, above all, the rule of law to which servicemen and women are subject to as much as civilians. Responsible ministers also need to recognise that and follow the courageous path blazed by Stephen Smith.

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