

Royal Australian Navy urged to tackle ice problem after deaths of HMAS Stirling sailors

THE Royal Australian Navy has a hidden culture of binge drinking and ice use that has resulted in the disturbing deaths of at least six young sailors.

Zoe Smith | News Corp Australia Network | APRIL 7, 2015 10:16PM



(Video not included)

The Royal Australian Navy is being urged to change its policies after an ABC investigation has revealed a disturbing spate of suicides involving sailors from the Navy base HMAS Stirling. Courtesy: ABC News.

THE Royal Australian Navy has a hidden culture of binge drinking and ice use that has resulted in the disturbing deaths of at least six young sailors.

In the space of just over a year, three friends — all bosuns from the Perth base HMAS Stirling — hanged themselves, an ABC investigation has revealed.

In one case, a sailor's wife tried to warn the Navy that her husband was an ice addict and yet he was sent to sea regardless, where he died of a drug and alcohol overdose.

Stuart Addison was the first of three close friends based at HMAS Stirling who hanged themselves between February 2012 and May 2013, the ABC's 7.30 revealed.



Tragic deaths ... three friends — Stuart Addison, Brett Dwyer and Jake Casey — hanged themselves. *Source:ABC*

The sailor had twice attempted suicide — once at sea — and ended up taking his life while on shore leave in Melbourne.

His family only found out about his previous suicide attempts and struggle with depression after his death, with the Navy citing privacy laws.

The sailor was in a coma for several days before his heartbroken father, Mark, was asked to withdraw his life support.

He told the ABC it was “a decision no parent should have to make”.

Mark Addison has now launched [a change.org campaign](#) to get the Navy to change its policies so families are informed if young sailors try to kill themselves.

“They knew, we weren’t told about it, we were kept in the dark. Somewhere in the system there’s a block — what happens in the Navy stays in the Navy.”



Answers needed ... Stuart Addison’s sister, Jessica, says her family was kept in the dark. *Source:ABC*

“I don’t know what’s triggering it, but it’s scary,” Stuart Addison’s sister, Jessica, told the ABC’s 7.30.

“Why aren’t they investigating it? Are they just seeing it as someone else passing? Why aren’t they seeing the pattern?”

Former sailor Matt Henry served at HMAS Stirling and was friends with three of the dead sailors. A pallbearer at Stuart Addison’s funeral, he described a Navy culture of heavy drinking as a “team-building exercise” and drugs.

Ice, he said, was “the drug of choice over in Western Australia, it was very accessible over there”.



Toxic environment ... former sailor Matt Henry says there was a culture of heavy drinking and ice use. *Source: ABC*

Three months after the death of Stuart Addison, another sailor and friend, Brett Dwyer, committed suicide.

He had been prescribed medication for major depression and had chemical burns to his hands from cleaning a ship's deck.

Medical documents show doctors requested in 2010 that Brett not be sent to sea, but the Navy sent him the next day anyway.

When he complained he was finding it difficult to work due to his hand injuries, his shipmates threatened to throw him overboard.

The sailor's RSL advocate, Brian O'Neill, told the ABC the shipmates' bullying was "disgusting".

"They actually put him overboard — hanging him up by his feet," he said

"You don't hang people upside down over the back of the ship. Especially where the propeller is — if one guys lets go, you're gone."



Change needed ... HMAS Stirling is the Royal Australian Navy's primary base off the west coast. *Source: ABC*

Brett Dwyer was discharged from the Navy in late 2011 after saying he was taking ice — but he told Mr O'Neill he'd only said that because he was desperate to get out of the Navy.

He took his own life on the day he attended his sister's graduation ceremony — just three months after the death of Stuart Addison.

His parents — who like the Addison family only found out about their son's psychiatric problems after their son's death — found him son dead in their home.

His family found him dead in their home the next morning.

"I wouldn't wish that on any family," the sailor's father, Mark Dwyer, said.

"What they did was wrong, they think of him as a number.

"He wasn't a number, he was our son."

The family said the final insult was when the Navy made an offer of compensation — \$857.49.



Beyond belief ... RSL advocate Brian O'Neill describes the Navy's bullying culture as "disgusting". *Source: ABC*

Almost a year after Brett Dwyer's death, the sailors' other best mate, Jake Casey, who had been a pallbearer at Dwyer's funeral, hanged himself too.

Jake's partner, Christine O'Neill, told the ABC the young sailor found the Navy culture degrading and started using alcohol and drugs to cope.

"He definitely didn't want to be on that ship," Ms O'Neill said.

"There is no way' he'd say to me, 'I'm sailing', to the extent that one day he said 'if I have to sail on that ship, I will, I will neck myself before I go on that ship'," she said.

Incredibly, three other Stirling sailors, also boatswains, died the year before Addison, Dwyer and Casey.

Steven Bebbington, a recovering alcoholic, hanged himself on-board the Stirling ship HMAS Toowoomba after a previous suicide attempt.

Does the Navy do enough to look after the mental health of its sailors? 0:42 (video not included)



Six current or former sailors have committed suicide or overdosed at HMAS Stirling, revealing a culture of binge drinking and use of the drug ice. Louise Milligan reports tonight on 7.30 on ABC TV. Courtesy ABC.

- April 7th 2015
- 3 years ago
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His best mate and pallbearer, Ewan McDonald, shot himself on-board HMAS Toowoomba six months later despite doctors' warnings that he was unfit to go to sea or handle weapons.

His sister Kenna Crichton told 7.30 her brother, who had made three previous suicide attempts, "fell through the cracks".

A month after the death of Ewan McDonald, Stirling sailor Bradley "Doc" Livingston died in November 2011.

His wife, Karley Livingston, said she tried to warn the Commanding Officer at Stirling her husband was an ice addict, but was turned away and sent to the Navy chaplain

"I basically told him that he needed help and I didn't want my kids burying their dad," she told 7.30.

“He said that drugs aren’t allowed in the Navy and I said ‘don’t treat me like a stupid Navy wife ... I’m not stupid, I know what goes over there’.

“A lot of people are on drugs and stuff on the base — the Navy people run amok.”

No action was taken and her husband later died in a hotel room in Cambodia while on a Navy stopover, his system was full of drugs and alcohol.

The Navy told 7.30 it would investigate Karley Livingston’s allegations.

If you or someone you know needs help, please contact [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14. There is also an anonymous online chat service available between 8pm and 4am AEST at [Lifeline.org.au](#), or visit [Beyond Blue’s website](#).

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