

Allegations of sexual misconduct and bullying sow division among eager navy recruits

Trainees at HMAS Creswell were meant to learn core values of naval officers, but their course ended with a court-martial and an inquiry that put the sexual behaviour of trainees under scrutiny



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Wed 23 Sep 2015 12.42 AEST Last modified on Thu 27 Oct 2016 10.04 AEDT



□ Graduates from the New Entry Officers Course 48 at their passing-out parade.
Photograph: Yuri Ramsey/Department of Defence

Every five months the freshest young naval recruits begin their careers at a small base in Jervis Bay on the NSW south coast.

They face intensive training at HMAS Creswell to introduce them to military life. It's their first impression of the Royal Australian Navy, geared to teach them its core values of "honour, honesty, courage, integrity and loyalty".

But leaked documents from the defence force reveal sex, sexism, bullying and harassment were also par for the course for the cohort of trainees on New Entry Officer Course (Neoc) 48.

Those events led to a court-martial of one trainee over allegations he got into bed with two trainees on separate occasions without their consent.

He was terminated from the navy, and raised a number of further allegations about misconduct, drinking, and sexual behaviour by trainees that sparked a defence inquiry, conducted by Commander Neville Wyatt.

Of the 102 who began the five-month course in February 2013, 86 remained when they finished in June of the same year. Using leaked documents, this is the story of what happened on Neoc 48.

HMAS Creswell – the first stop for the navy’s newest recruits

Neoc 48 began like all the others. The trainees are sent on a bus to HMAS Creswell and shown to their quarters. Most of are very young, some only 17. The majority are men, with a much smaller group of women. They are invariably excited, and many chat on social media before the course begins.

“Hey guys. I received my letter of offer a few weeks back for NEOC 48”, one trainee wrote in an online post. “I have heaps of friends from my OSB who are in for it as well. If you start a group or something I’ll add who I can and eventually we will have quite a few haha. Cheers.”

The change is a shock for some. Life on base is heavily structured. The day begins at 5.30am (except for Sundays, with a sleep in until 6.30am), and is carefully planned until “pipe down” at 10.30pm. The course was split into four divisions. A clocktower looks out above a wide field where trainees exercise daily. They do all kinds of drills, from carrying ropes and running along the beach, swimming or learning to drive a boat. The sea breeze always whips up from the water, keeping the parade flags ever waving.

The navy takes great pride in these courses, which are a central part of their recruitment strategy. Countless photos and videos of the course are posted online, with articles on the Navy’s official news site under [headlines such as “Training hard to make the team work”](#). The trainees show high school students from across the state around the base to give them an insight into navy life. Other Neoc courses feature as lead items on DefenceJobs advertisements and videos online.

The trainees on Neoc 48 lived in close, cramped quarters. The two main accommodation units have small, single cabins. They are allowed limited personal items. The young naval officers are made to work together as a unit, not as individuals.

For the first two weeks they are given a series of welcome presentations. One of the many things they cover is a strict policy of “no fraternisation”: trainees are not allowed to sleep

together or engage in any sexual activity. The training commander for the course told them: “There is to be no bonking.”

Another divisional officer, the documents show, would also tell the group: “Have fun with each other, not on each other.”

Many of the trainees laughed at the officers’ attempts to seem young and hip. None knew it at the time, but what they were told about fraternisation would become a central question for the defence inquiry into Neoc 48.

Trainee court-martialled and terminated

Two months into the course the group had become divided. One of the four divisions particularly began experiencing friction between the trainees. Bullying and name calling had been reported, and there were rumours circulating about sexual relationships.

The documents show there was talk about one female trainee in particular. Other trainees assumed she was sleeping around. Some claimed a list had been circulated that outlined her sexual partners, while others suggested it was a list of people she wanted to sleep with. The woman denied that the list related to either of these claims.

On a weekend in April an incident occurred that split those in the course even further. A group of trainees were drinking - against base regulations – and playing a card game known as presidents and bastards. The group included a female trainee, who stopped drinking and went to bed around 9.30pm. The other trainees continued to drink.

There is a gun room at the base where trainees would occasionally go and – in the words of one divisional officer – “get on the cans”. About midnight, a few trainees decided to climb the clock tower on the base. They were caught by a security guard and sent back to their cabins.

One of the male trainees then entered the bedroom of two female trainees and climbed into bed with one while she was asleep.

One of the two women would later tell the defence inquiry officer: “Somewhere between that [climbing the clocktower] and 3 o’clock in the morning [redacted] came into my room while I was asleep, and then I woke up and he was under the bed covers in my bed.”

One of the former training officers at the base told Wyatt he saw the male trainee sitting by himself outside the officers building the day after, when it all came to light. The officer had no knowledge of the events. He asked the trainee: “What’s going on?”

The male trainee responded: “I fucked up sir.”

The flow of information on the base was immediately locked down. The same training officer told Wyatt, months after the event, that he still had no idea what happened between the trainees, other than that he was told the trainee had allegedly assaulted the two women.

Rumours of what happened bubbled away among the trainees. It caused even deeper conflict between them. As one of the female trainee victims said: “After the incident, the division kind of split in half anyway. It was like the half that thought what [redacted] did wasn’t right and the half that was still, [redacted] is the better officer, like there was a big thing that ... he’s got more experience, he’d make a better officer than these girls any day, which is stupid.”

The male trainee was court-martialled and terminated from the navy. It is unclear whether there were any other consequences or what the precise charge was against him. A spokeswoman for the defence department declined to release details of the case, and advised Guardian Australia to lodge a freedom of information request with the registrar of military justice.

Counter-claims spark further defence inquiry

When the male trainee was terminated, he made a series of counter-accusations about the behaviour of other trainees on Neoc 48, including the two women whose rooms he entered.

Wyatt was given the job of investigating, and questioned a number of the trainees and staff at HMAS Creswell throughout 2014.

The focus of Wyatt’s inquiry focused on the counter allegations, which included a range of inappropriate behaviour, including sexual relationships, unauthorised consumption of alcohol, bullying and harassment.

Much of the inquiry focused on the two women who made the allegations about the male officer. They were questioned about their sexual history and whether they had engaged in any inappropriate behaviour. Both strenuously denied having had sex on the base.



Aircraft perform a flypast at the passing-out parade for Neoc 48. Photograph: Yuri Ramsey/Department of Defence

Most of the interviewees on the base could only reiterate rumours about the female trainees. In interviews some of the divisional officers appeared to show a disdain for the two women.

One of the two women said of the rumours about her: “A lot of people talked about me, sir. Same with most of the females. After a while I just learnt to ignore it. The environment with Neoc was pretty much like high school.

“It was like a little schoolyard that people just go make rumours up about people and run around and tell everyone. Most of the people decided that it was just because they had a lack of drama, they had to create drama and problems.”

Training officers seemed unaware of bullying and harassment

Some of the trainees gave evidence that their superior officers appeared to be either unaware of inappropriate behaviour on the base, or were turning a blind eye.

A third female trainee, who was not involved in the earlier allegations, told the inquiry she was being bullied while on the course. She told Wyatt: “There was a fair bit of harassment that went on in Neoc 48 and bullying. There seemed to be a large boys’ club, all the boys particularly in [Redacted] division were very disrespectful towards everyone, majority females. They were quite rude, very immature in their actions and they didn’t treat women well.”

She said it was “mostly verbal, name calling, rumour spreading. Purposely excluding people from groups and just being generally nasty”.

When she notified her superior officer he did take action. But he seemed to have been entirely unaware until then that there were any problems.

It was also widely believed that trainees were having sex.

When one of the divisional officers was asked about whether he believed the trainees were sleeping with one another, he said: “It wouldn’t surprise me ... In all honesty, I don’t know. You put young people together. You lock them up away from the world for an extended period. They’re going to have sex. It’s that simple.”

A fourth female trainee said she believed the officers were turning a blind eye to this. She told the inquiry she found the response from the superior officers disappointing, particularly given how sensitive the defence force was to issues surrounding sexual behaviour.

“I saw a lot of these, especially young girls, going through this very extreme ...developmental period where they were sort of starting to come to terms with their own self-confidence, being put into a high pressured military environment, having a lot of attention from boys and having alcohol made available to them ... it seemed like quite a heady mix to me,” she told Wyatt.

The female trainee said she was aware of the practice of “rock-spidering” , although she said she was “unsure whether it was the right terminology”. What she described was two trainees waiting outside the room of other trainees who were having sex, then entering their room to “spring” them.

The phrase [is also associated with a Canberra student college practice](#) in which male students would knock on female students’ doors.

“I was aware of this thing called rock spidering or something like that, where guys would wait outside the room if there was two trainees in the room,” she said.

Wyatt was unfamiliar with the phrase. He appeared to believe that the two trainees outside would be acting as lookouts. He said to the trainee: “So the two outside the cabins were lookouts were they?”

She responded that it would involve them waiting to spring the trainee and “have a bit of a laugh at him”.

Wyatt responded: “Oh I see it wasn’t there for protection ... it was about trying to catch them in the act so to speak ... and that was referred to as rock-spidering?”

The trainee said she believed it was “something like that”, but acknowledged she might have used the wrong term.

Defence refuses to disclose material

The details of the allegations on Neoc 48 have been suppressed with the agreement of senior defence force figures.

In April 2013 the defence department issued a public notice about the event – known as a “hot issue brief” – that was suppressed “until investigations are completed”.

A spokeswoman for the defence department confirmed the brief was not disclosed on the order of the defence secretary, Dennis Richardson, the acting chief of navy, and the then chief of defence, David Hurley, who retired in June 2014 and is now the governor of [New South Wales](#).

The brief [was published on Tuesday](#) after Guardian Australia contacted the department.

Wyatt’s inquiry ended in 2014. The defence department has provided no explanation for why the brief was not published then.

All other details of the case remain suppressed. The defence department has declined to release Wyatt’s final report. A spokeswoman directed Guardian Australia to lodge a freedom of information request to the registrar of military justice for details of the restricted court-martial.

The spokeswoman said all recommendations from Wyatt’s report had been adopted, and no other concerns had been raised on subsequent Neoc intakes.

The events left a profound mark on the trainees’ early days in the navy. Not all came through it, and some are no longer with the defence forces.

The vice admiral of the navy, Ray Griggs, attended the Neoc 48 graduation ceremony in June 2013. He shook hands with the trainees, as proud parents looked on, and wished them all the best in their careers.

There was no mention of the events of April.

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