

Revealed: senior military figures suppressed allegations of sexual misconduct at navy training base

Allegations at HMAS Creswell in Jervis Bay include that one trainee got into a sleeping female colleague's bed, as well as bullying and harassment



Graduates from New Entry Officers Course 48 during their passing out parade at HMAS Creswell. Photograph: Yuri Ramsey/Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence [Australian defence force](#)

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Senior military and defence officials suppressed allegations of serious misconduct and inappropriate sexual behaviour by naval officer trainees at a prestigious training facility, including one trainee who was court-martialled after he allegedly got into bed with another trainee while she was asleep.

The allegations surround HMAS Creswell in Jervis Bay, on the NSW south coast, where young prospective officers spend the first five months of their naval careers. The trainee who was court-martialled raised further allegations about trainees and supervisors during an officer entry course on the base in 2013, prompting HMAS Creswell's commanding officer, Captain Stephen Hussey, to set up an independent inquiry under Commander Neville Wyatt.

The allegation involving the male trainee who got into bed with another trainee has been suppressed at the highest levels of the Australian Defence Force for the past two years. A briefing on the matter – known as a hot issue brief – was prepared for the defence force's website in April 2013. But the information in the brief was not published, with the agreement

of the acting chief of navy, the defence secretary, Dennis Richardson, and the chief of the defence force, David Hurley – now the governor of [New South Wales](#).

A defence department spokeswoman said the reason it was not published was “to maintain the integrity” of the investigation. Defence has published [more than 300 hot issues briefs](#) since 2011 detailing a range of serious incidents across the armed forces.

The [hot issue brief was released](#) only after Guardian Australia contacted the defence department on Tuesday.

Defence has refused to release details of the court-martial. A spokeswoman told Guardian Australia a freedom of information request should be lodged with the registrar of military justice for the release of documents.

Leaked records of interviews undertaken by Wyatt for his inquiry, obtained by Guardian Australia, reveal allegations that:

- A male trainee entered the bedrooms of two female trainees without their consent, and lay in bed with one of them while she was asleep
- Bullying and harassment by male trainees went unchecked by supervising officers
- Sexual relationships occurred between trainees, despite a strict policy of “no fraternisation”
- Alcohol was consumed on the base, contrary to regulations
- Training and supervisory staff appeared to be unaware of inappropriate behaviour or ignored it

The navy conducts a New Entry Officer course (Neoc) every six months. Neoc 48 ran from February 2013 to June 2013. Some of the trainees are only 17 when they begin basic training and many have just graduated from high school.

Extracts from the inquiry interviews

According to the interviews conducted by Wyatt, one trainee told a lieutenant about the harassment she had witnessed, but she said: “I don’t think he knew what was happening. When I took my case to him he seemed quite shocked.”

In another instance a former training officer said inspection rounds of the trainees were often cancelled due to “laziness”.

Another trainee alleged some trainees had engaged in what she believed was known as “rock-spidering”, where trainees entered the rooms of others who were having sex, without their consent.

Some trainees complained about a strong culture of harassment and bullying within the training course and a “boys’ club” that was disrespectful towards women.

One trainee told the inquiry that in one division she found the young men to be “very disrespectful towards everyone ... They were quite rude, very immature in their actions and they didn’t treat women very well”.

A trainee told the inquiry she believed “there was a lot of [sex] going on or a blind eye being turned to it”.

Allegations of alcohol consumption included one weekend when “a number of trainees got on the cans in the gun room one night and [in] the clock tower”, according to one of the divisional officers at the base.

Guardian Australia has published excerpts from Wyatt’s interviews, with names redacted.

The most serious allegation concerned the behaviour of a trainee who was accused of entering the bedroom of two female trainees in the middle of the night.

The trainee was charged and court-martialled. He was later given a notice of termination, and raised counter-allegations of other inappropriate behaviour on the course. This sparked the investigation by Wyatt.

According to the transcript the women told Wyatt: “Somewhere between that 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.”

The woman was questioned extensively during the court martial about her sexual history, and subsequently by Wyatt. She denied allegations of inappropriate behaviour and told Wyatt that when she was questioned during the court martial, “I have never been so embarrassed in my life being, like, attacked about what happened or what I was doing.”

She later told Wyatt: “I’m not sorry for coming forth, because that kind of stuff is not right and I was pretty messed up because of it afterwards.”

Extract from the inquiry interviews

The same male trainee was also court-martialled in relation to entering a second female trainee’s room.

The second female trainee also faced questions from Wyatt about her sexual history, and denied having inappropriate relationships with other trainees. She told him: “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.”

On the weekend the allegations were made, in late April 2013, information about what had happened was quickly locked down.

One of the divisional officers later told Wyatt: “I still don’t really know what occurred the night that all the accusations were made. All I know is that it was something sexual.”

Other trainees were highly critical of how the course was run. One trainee told Wyatt she was disappointed at its management, and was surprised at the level of fraternisation, “given how

defence are very sensitive towards issues concerning sexual behaviour in particular, or unwanted sexual behaviour”.

She said: “It seemed like quite a heady mix to have a small number of females, a larger number of males and then alcohol thrown in.”

In response to a request for details of the Wyatt inquiry and the court-martial to be released, a defence department spokeswoman said: “Restricted court martials are a tri-service function and the release of the outcome of restricted court martials is the responsibility of the registrar of military justice. A freedom of information application should be made to the registrar of military justice for the information requested.

“There is no presumption that any report of an inquiry officer will be released under the Defence (Inquiry) Regulations 1985 for publication, this decision is made on a case by case basis. The inquiry report of commander Wyatt will not be released.”

The spokeswoman said a hot issue brief relating to the incident was not disclosed at the time with the agreement of some of the defence force’s most senior officers.

“Navy prepared hot issue brief 1094 dated 29 April 2013 which was not publicly released at the time as the matter was under investigation by the Australian Defence Force Investigative Service. The non disclosure was agreed to by the acting chief of navy, the secretary and the chief of the defence force in May 2013.

“As the matter is no longer under investigation the hot issue brief has now been released and is available on the defence internet under disclosure hot issue briefs 1094.”

A spokesman for NSW governor David Hurley - who was then the chief of the defence force - referred questions about the brief to the defence department.

The hot issue brief, now available online, said: “Two female trainees have alleged they have been assaulted, possibly indecently, by a male trainee at a navy training establishment.”

The brief said the allegations were being investigated by the ADF investigative services, and the trainees were being accommodated in separate locations pending the outcome of the investigation.

The defence spokeswoman said all recommendations by Wyatt were adopted in full at HMAS Creswell.

“All changes recommended by the inquiry have been implemented. No concerns of a similar nature have been raised on subsequent Neoc courses,” she said.

Several incidents in recent years have shone a spotlight on the treatment of women in the defence forces.

In 2013 two cadets at the Australian defence force academy [were prosecuted](#) for filming a woman while she was having sex with one of the men, and live streaming it over Skype. [In a further scandal](#) known as the “Jedi council”, six defence force members were dismissed over

their involvement in producing and distributing explicit and demeaning images of women, including of some female defence personnel.

The then chief of army, Lieutenant General David Morrison, [made a powerful public address](#) in June 2013 to say abuse would not be tolerated in the armed forces.

More historical abuse findings have been raised in the course of the [defence abuse response taskforce](#) and reviews by the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) into cultural reforms within defence. The taskforce [revealed harrowing stories of historical abuse](#) at HMAS Leeuwin, a navy base where more than 200 junior navy recruits were abused between 1960 and 1984. It also revealed that more than 1,100 alleged abusers and enablers of abuse were [still serving with the defence force](#).

The defence department has published the findings of a [number of other inquiries conducted](#) within the force.

Successive inquiries have been launched to address allegations of abuse and attempt to stamp out poor practices and gender bias across the ADF. The defence abuse response taskforce is continuing to investigate allegations of abuse across the ADF.

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