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Child abuse royal commission: Former Navy officer says abuse 'surprised and horrified' him

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Updated 22 Jun 2016, 8:21pm Wed 22 Jun 2016, 8:21pm



PHOTO: Former divisional officer at HMAS

Leeuwin, Geoffrey Curran, has given evidence to the royal commission. (ABC News: Philippa McDonald)

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A former New South Wales governor has told the child sex abuse royal commission he was determined to stamp out abusive initiations at HMAS Leeuwin after experiencing it himself as a Navy recruit.

Retired Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair, who described his occupation as a farmer, served in the Navy between 1948 and 1989, and was the governor of New South Wales between 1990 and 1996.

After a damning report by Judge Rapke in 1971 into abuse of naval recruits at HMAS Leeuwin, he was appointed as executive officer at Leeuwin.

On Tuesday he joined those giving evidence to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Sydney.

The royal commission is examining the experiences of child sexual abuse survivors who attended Australian Defence Force (ADF) organisations, including HMAS Leeuwin, The Army Apprentice School Balcombe in Victoria and ADF cadets since 2000.

"It [the abuse] did surprise me because it was totally foreign to anything I had experienced in then 24 years in the Navy and it surprised and horrified me," he said.

He told the commission he worked to lift morale among recruits and supervision after Judge Rapke found repetitive acts of bullying and violence at the base, particularly in 1970.

When it was put to him there were several more complaints of abuse from the time he was at HMAS Leeuwin, Retired Rear Admiral Sinclair said: "I'm appalled by it. I simply don't understand how it would happen, that they weren't reported."

A 2014 Defence investigation into HMAS Leeuwin received 207 complaints of abuse from former recruits over the 1960s and 1970s and found "apparent widespread underreporting" and "disturbing incidences of sexual abuse of junior recruits" including anal rape and sexual assaults.

When asked by president of the royal commission, Justice Peter McClellan, about his own experience of "initiation" in his early Navy days, Retired Rear Admiral Sinclair said "it was a very formal initiation process".

"We were set upon by the fourth years," he said.

"We were taken to the communal bathroom, stripped down, had to wear male bikinis."

He and other recruits were covered in treacle, honey, sawdust and boot polish. Towels and shoes were thrown at them and they were made to dive for pieces of toilet paper on the floor.

"I have to tell you it was terribly uncomfortable and not very exciting," he said.

"The effect on me was to ensure that this never happened again under my watch."

SEXUAL 'RITE OF INITIATION' WAS NORMAL: FORMER OFFICER

Earlier, ex-divisional officer from HMAS Leeuwin Geoffrey Edwin Curran, told the royal commission a sexual act as a "rite of initiation" was acceptable for junior officers who attended a Navy base in Western Australia.

Mr Curran said he had heard "talk" of incidents known as "nuggeting", which involved rubbing boot polish on the genitals of junior recruits.

After questioning from the commission's chair, Justice Peter McClellan, Mr Curran said it did occur but it was not widespread.

"Initiation has been around since I was at school, sir, and I just would regard that sort of initiation as the rite of initiation," Mr Curran told the inquiry.

Justice McClellan asked: "So, do you suggest it's acceptable?"

Mr Curran replied: "At that age I would have, sir."

The witness was also asked about his response to [evidence given by five former junior recruits at HMAS Leeuwin](#).

"It was a gut wrenching experience listening to it," he said.

One of the witnesses who testified was Glen Greaves, who joined HMAS Leeuwin in 1971.

The inquiry heard Mr Greaves had been sexually assaulted and forced to lick a urinal by other junior recruits.

His mail was later stuffed into a toilet.

Mr Curran was questioned about the incident and denied he threatened to charge Mr Greaves for blocking the toilet.

"I cannot remember saying I'm going to charge [him]," Mr Curran replied. "I am vague about the envelopes in the toilet. I just cannot believe that I said that."

The hearing continues.

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First posted 22 Jun 2016, 3:02pm Wed 22 Jun 2016, 3:02pm

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Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-22/child-abuse-royal-commission-navy-base-rite-of-initiation/7533556>