

Navy orders declared homosexuality a 'dischargeable offence' in 1960s, hearing told

Royal commission told confidential orders sent to navy officers could have stopped young recruits from reporting sexual abuse

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□ The royal commission chairman, Peter McClellan, on Tuesday. Photograph: Jeremy Piper/AFP/Getty Images

Orders circulating in the navy in the 1960s describing homosexuality as a dischargeable offence could have prevented young men from reporting sexual abuse, a royal commission has heard.

Confidential orders sent to navy officers in 1965 which connected homosexuality and communism were read out on the third day of a royal commission hearing into child sex abuse in army, navy and air force training facilities.

A former NSW governor, Peter Sinclair, who was the navy officer sent to help raise morale at the notorious HMAS Leeuwin in 1972, was asked about the orders on Thursday during his second day of evidence.

“The [Royal Australian Navy](#) cannot afford and does not want to retain homosexuals in its ranks,” stated one of the confidential orders.

While there was no evidence to support the suggestion that there might be a direct connection between homosexuals and communism, the order said “the possibility of blackmail cannot be disregarded”.

Patrick Nunan, a solicitor representing Leeuwin abuse survivors, said the fear of discharge for homosexuality could have stopped recruits making complaints about sexual abuse.

Sinclair agreed but said neither he nor the base commodore ever made an issue to recruits of homosexuality being banned in the navy.

He said there were no complaints of sexual abuse either to him or other officers when he was at HMAS Leeuwin.

Earlier on Thursday Sinclair said he thought initiation ceremonies should continue, but not those that involve bastardisation and abuse.

He told the inquiry he had been initiated many times and covered in “smelly messes” as part of the centuries-old naval tradition of holding a ceremony each time a ship crosses the equator.

The commission chairman, Peter McClellan, asked if there was a danger that such ceremonies could be a starting point for allowing the type of physical abuse that happened at Leeuwin.

Sinclair agreed there was a danger of initiation ceremonies getting out of control.

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