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Air Force Cadets who challenged management bullied out, royal commission told

By [Jackson Vernon](#)

Updated 28 Jun 2016, 5:53pm Tue 28 Jun 2016, 5:53pm



PHOTO: Justice McClellan asked a witness how she would change the culture at the Air Force Cadets. (AAP: Jeremy Piper, file photo)

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Members of the Australian Air Force Cadets (AAFC) who challenged a "boys' club" management in an effort to protect people from abuse were "bullied or back-stabbed out of the organisation", a royal commission has heard.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has heard evidence from a woman, identified as CJF, who was working as second commander of a squadron in New South Wales when a girl, identified as CJE, came forward with allegations of sexual abuse against an instructor.

CJF said she had supported the girl and her family after she made the allegations.

CJF launched a scathing attack against the AAFC, telling the commission the organisation mistreated her and CJE.

She said comments made to the girl's family by management during the investigation included "don't blow this out of proportion" and "this isn't that serious".

CJF said when the family told her about the comments she felt AAFC headquarters were trying to "patronise them and to also quiet them down".

"There is a bad culture in cadets, although there are policies in place, we simply refer to them as red tape," she added.

"Although there are policies protecting children, we think of them as a joke."

She also told the commission she was in line to backfill the commanding officer of her squadron for when he was on leave, but her application was knocked back.

CJF said she lodged four complaints with AAFC over being denied the opportunity.

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The chair of the commission, Justice Peter McClellan, asked the witness how she thought the culture should change.

She said the "the old boys' club" mentality needed to be changed from the top.

"From what I've seen over the last 17 years at cadets everyone that was trying to do something good or trying to put in better practices, has been bullied or back-stabbed out of the organisation."

"I have not heard from the AAFC in over a year. It is evident they have no consideration or insight into the harm they continue to cause.

"I am very concerned and aware that the vast majority of staff members will not go to the lengths I've gone [to] in order to protect a cadet's best interests.

"But the next time they will not have someone to stand up for them and protect them."

CJF received a round of applause after she concluded her evidence.

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Sharon O'Donnell, a civilian member of the AAFC who previously worked as a squadron trainer, handled the initial investigation brought by CJE into former Air Force instructor [Christopher Adams](#).

Justice McClellan asked Ms O'Donnell about her questioning of the victim during her investigation, particularly whether she pondered the possibility her words might inflict "very serious trauma upon someone who had suffered a sexual assault".

"Probably due to the inexperience I had at the time, no, because what I'd written there I went through with my mentor at the time," Ms O'Donnell said.

She also told the commission that cadets were always encouraged to speak up if they saw something inappropriate.

"We always tell the cadets they can always approach any staff member or another senior cadet if they're concerned or troubled," she said.

Ms O'Donnell later recommended a full investigation be launched into Adams, as well as his suspension.

The mother of a 15-year-old cadet told the commission on Monday her [daughter killed herself after being threatened with a dishonourable discharge from the AAFC](#) over an inappropriate relationship.

The royal commission will soon call senior officers from the Royal Australian Air Force, as well as the Vice Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Ray Griggs.

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First posted 28 Jun 2016, 4:21pmTue 28 Jun 2016, 4:21pm

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Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-28/air-force-cadets-challenge-management-boys-club-bullied-out/7546170>