

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Air force's top guns in alleged 'sex pest' bullying scandal

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### EXCLUSIVE

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Elite Australian fighter jet pilots have been investigated over an alleged bullying scandal in which a secret online chat group described a fellow aviator as a “creepy sex pest” and sought to use the term as his official call sign during a sensitive overseas exercise.

Two investigations have been conducted into the row involving pilots from the Queensland-based No 6 Squadron, who receive about \$1.5 million worth of specialised training to fly the RAAF's new electronic warfare jets.

The latest investigation, finalised this month, found some squadron members had behaved unacceptably and been involved in harassment when they targeted a pilot over his friendship with a female ground crew member.

The victim unsuccessfully sought to quit the air force over the call-sign issue and was later transferred against his wishes to another squadron where he remains on desk duties despite being one of the few highly trained pilots with fast jet and Growler experience.

Defence said “the matter was reported, investigated and reviewed in accordance with approved policies” but declined to reveal whether any pilots faced official sanction.

The complaint arose when the Growler squadron was participating in Exercise Red Flag — an advanced annual combat training operation in the US under warlike conditions using live ammunition and enemy hardware. During the exercise, one of the squadron's \$300 million planes was destroyed after bursting

into flames on the runway.

Some squadron members who took part in Exercise Red Flag established the group chat using the encrypted communications app Signal. The chat group discussed the victim's friendship with the ground crew member and suggested his call sign for radio transmissions be "Shermanator, a creepy sex pest type of character", according to a copy of the latest investigation report by Group Captain Robert Denney, the commander of 82 Wing, which oversees the Growler and Hornet squadrons.

The group posted emojis and a picture of the victim walking with the female ground crew member while they were on an outing in the US during the exercise.

The sex-pest term "persisted" and was used behind the victim's back and at executive level, the victim alleged.

Some squadron members allegedly chanted or shouted "sex pest" when the victim attended a meeting to decide what call sign pilots would be allotted.

One chat group member also approached the female ground crew member to warn her that the victim was "creepy".

Later, the victim was told that he was thought of by a senior commander as "wanting to f..k everything that moves".

The victim's unsuccessful attempt to quit the air force was sparked by the call-sign issue and other incidents, including questions over a manoeuvre he performed turning a Growler at high speed and low altitude, and being forced back from leave to do work that he said amounted to being asked to "hang pictures" in the unit's memorial room.

In his report, Group Captain Denney found the chat group discussion and pictures amounted to "low-level unacceptable behaviour".

Group Captain Denney said the incident where a squadron member approached the female ground crew member and told her the victim was creepy had not been harassment.

The approach was made because the pilot was concerned the victim's friendship was "affecting squadron cohesion".

Group Captain Denney said this occurred after squadron pilots were involved in the Growler runway fire, which nearly resulted in the loss of its crew.

Some squadron members were also witnesses and first responders to a fatal helicopter crash.

He said this had resulted in emotional and psychological pressure on the whole unit.

Group Captain Denney said comments to the victim that a commander thought he wanted to "f..k everything that moves" had been designed to explain the concerns about the victim's relationship, but he found they were unacceptable and could have been said more tactfully.

Group Captain Denney noted the commanding officer of No 6 Squadron was made aware of "some possible call signs", including the proposed "sex pest" name for the victim, during a dinner with other air crew and had made it clear the name was unacceptable.

On claims the term sex pest was chanted or called out during a call sign board meeting, Group Captain Denney said he could not determine how the term was used and that it was not considered as an official call sign. He said it was "offensive, insulting and had a very real capacity to be humiliating given the public nature of the event". He found this to be "harassment".

While call sign nicknames were typically associated with "less-flattering personal traits", they were not intended to be insulting or humiliating.

Group Captain Denney said it was "likely" there had been some discussion about the victim's relationship at executive level in the squadron. On concerns about low flying, he said the actions by the victim were undertaken with the genuine belief they were appropriate and permissible.

However, he said he would not expect a pilot to be executing 6.5g turns at an

altitude of 150 feet and this was not part of the core Growler role unless discussed in the authorisation brief.

Asked about the decision last week, a Defence spokesman refused to comment.