

Chapter 7

ADF culture

7.1 In its first progress report, the committee commended the ADF on its efforts to improve Australia's military justice system. It was concerned, however, that reforms to processes would not of themselves tackle the deeper problems of an entrenched culture that 'may well undermine the success of current reforms'. This chapter looks at the steps being taken by the ADF to improve its culture.

7.2 The military justice system report found instances of breakdowns in the reporting system that allowed unsafe practices to go unheeded for some time. It expressed concern about the ineffectiveness of the reporting system as an early warning mechanism and as a means of stopping unsound practices.¹ The report identified a culture that encourages:

- an environment where there exists strong peer group pressure—where one is expected to be strong, stoic and uncomplaining in the face of pain or emotional stress, giving rise to an attitude that seeking help is an admission of weakness;² and
- an anti-reporting ethic of silence that leads to underreporting of inappropriate behaviour with some members fearing reprisals for reporting wrongdoing or for assisting an inquiry into wrongdoing.³

ADF culture—a demanding environment

7.3 Colonel Anthony Cotton, Director of Mental Health, Department of Defence, spoke authoritatively on this matter of self-help before the committee in its 2004–05 inquiry into Australia's military justice system. He stated:

The help-seeking culture in general—the idea that it is okay to go and get some help—is something that, in my opinion, is foreign to men of our culture. We have seen that in lots of places. I think the military environment exacerbates that because the military environment is all about being robust, being independent and those sorts of things and being able to look out for yourself.⁴

7.4 Indeed, more recently before the coroner inquiring into the death of Trooper Lawrence, Brigadier Mark Bornholt agreed with the proposition that the culture of soldiers was 'can do': that 'we do what we're told and it's dangerous we know, but

1 Paragraph 7.69.

2 Paragraph 7.24

3 Paragraph 12.109

4 *Committee Hansard*, 21 June 2004, p. 4.

we've got to endure it'.⁵ Dr Stefan Rudzki told the coroner that the buddy system appeared to have failed—that 'there appeared to be a culture that training took priority over all other issues...' The coroner quoted from the doctor's report:

There is clear evidence of troops and staff being desensitised to the risk and consequences of heat injury...Troops appeared to expect to fall victim to heat injury and be 'bagged'...In my view, a defeatist culture had evolved regarding heat injury. Everyone expected to fall victim to heat.⁶

7.5 The committee understands the place that this culture has in the ADF in a tough and demanding environment. Nevertheless, it does underscore the importance of supervision and of adherence to rules and guidelines.

7.6 At times, this culture, which values courage and encourages teamwork, can lead to inappropriate behaviour directed at those deemed to be 'weak'.

Learning culture in the ADF

7.7 In its 2005 report on Australia's military justice system, the committee did not have any recent statistics available to gauge the levels of bullying and harassment in the ADF, if any existed, nor to indicate the willingness or otherwise of persons to report such incidents. It did, however, have strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that there were pockets in the ADF where bullying and harassment had been tolerated and, furthermore, that there were substantial obstacles preventing members from reporting such inappropriate behaviour.

7.8 The committee recommended that the ADF commission a review of its disciplinary and administrative systems. The government agreed but went further. It suggested that any review of the military justice system would require a 'broader basis that allows examination of all aspects of the military justice system'.⁷ As part of this undertaking, the CDF announced in October 2005, an audit of the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments.⁸

7.9 The audit team was to inquire into the culture of ADF schools and training establishments in order to 'determine whether the culture is inappropriate, in particular, whether a culture of harassment and bullying exists; and in general,

5 *Inquest into the death of Angus Lawrence [2005] NTMC 069*, page 6 of 29, <http://www.nt.gov.au/justice/ntmc/documents/judgements/2005/ntmc069.html> (accessed 8 January 2007).

6 *Inquest into the death of Angus Lawrence [2005] NTMC 069*, paragraph 36.

7 Government's response to committee's 2005 recommendations. See appendix 2 – government response to recommendation 35.

8 Australian Defence Force, *Report to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee on Progress of Enhancements to the Military Justice System*, April 2006, entry under recommendation 35.

whether irregularities against established policies and processes of administration occur'.⁹

7.10 The audit did not appear to have a benchmark against which to measure changes. Even so, it went on to find clear evidence of improvements in behavioural standards in all the training establishments it visited and of 'universal knowledge of ADF policies of zero tolerance of bullying and harassment'.¹⁰ The evidence indicated that:

...much has been done to create a more favourable learning culture, involving effective teamwork between the trainers and trainees, to enhance the learning outcomes. However, there is still much to be done to reach best practice; one in which those who succeed and those who do not are handled with firmness, fairness and empathy by all involved.¹¹

In all training establishments, trainees are assessed on the basis of both technical competencies (skills and knowledge) and attitudes (sometimes referred to as 'soldierly qualities', 'officer-like qualities', and 'personal development'). Trainees were frequently unhappy however, about the consistency of the latter assessments, being particularly disdainful of those who perform well only in front of the staff (at ADFA these are known as 'PDAS Hunters' who 'go jack' on their mates). Trainers frequently commented that they were not sufficiently confident in the framework for such assessments to ensure consistency and constructive feedback for trainees' personal development.¹²

7.11 Although the audit team gained a strong impression that the level of direct bullying of those perceived to be performing poorly by trainers or trainees was generally low given the rules on inappropriate behaviour, they found other forms of more subtle abuse 'not uncommon'.¹³

More generally, it was apparent that few trainees were assisted to develop skills in working and dealing with others, other than through the forceful promotion of 'teamwork'. One trainee said: 'People become victims because they let the team down.' Another said: 'There needs to be a change of culture where we can ask for help with a discipline problem. Now I feel I have failed my job if I ask for help.' Those who were not contributing to the team tended to be isolated and ignored (with the risk of being bullied),

9 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, Attachment A.

10 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 106.

11 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 61.

12 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 53

13 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 196.

rather than being assisted and supported by their peers, or their peers seeking assistance. The culture seems to encourage trainees to be negatively judgmental about their peers as demonstrated by the frequency of terms such as 'chitters', 'malingerers', 'marginals', 'jack', 'gobbing off' and 'bludgers'.¹⁴

7.12 Having identified a culture that 'seems to be so judgemental and disrespectful' as with those 'on the wrong bus', the audit team suggested the need 'for better leadership by divisional staff and other trainers to promote respect while still promoting comradeship'.¹⁵

7.13 These sentiments and the negative attitude toward those deemed to be failing is all too reminiscent of those described in the committee's 2005 report on Australia's military justice system. The committee quotes at length the following examples from the recent audit:

It was very apparent that many trainees in particular, but also some trainers, find it difficult to handle relations with those not seen to be contributing sufficiently to the team. The most common response in our focus group discussions was that they isolate those not contributing, excluding them (in varying degrees) from social interaction. One trainee said '...they get singled out and blamed when things go wrong or everyone stops liking them...' Another said '...they are isolated and treated basically like crap and it's sad and pathetic...' Whereas another trainee stated that it '...[depends] on the individual people, either [they are] picked on or left alone...' The perceptions of those isolated in this way, however, are frequently not so benign: some clearly consider themselves to be bullied by the rest of the group, with the implicit or explicit encouragement of the training staff. As defined in the Defence Instruction (endorsed by us), bullying is not just about physical abuse, but includes all forms of behaviour that belittles people and undermines their self-worth.¹⁶

7.14 A similar approach was observed in relation to those suffering injuries:

Many trainees and some trainers are very judgemental about the motives of injured and sick trainees. We constantly heard the terms 'chitters' (i.e. those with medical 'chits') and 'malingerers', always with the reassurance that those with genuine injuries are respected as that could happen to anyone. Those with injuries and in the relevant rehabilitation platoon often held a contrary view. At Kapooka, a healthy trainee mentioned (innocently) that his platoon performed an 'eyes right at Digger James Platoon'. He thought this was a sign of respect. Those from Digger James Platoon were very

14 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 54.

15 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 195.

16 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 138.

clear that far from showing respect, they felt this was a sign of denigration (we have since been advised that this is not a 'practice', but may have occurred, and may have been misunderstood). There is evidently some way to go for trainees, supported by their trainers, to show respect for those who are sick or injured (we were also made aware of occasional retribution by a rehabilitated trainee).¹⁷

7.15 This observation is of particular concern to the committee. In its report on Australia's military justice system, the committee devoted a chapter to problems identified at Army training establishments especially the School of Infantry, Singleton (SOI). It should be noted that a number of reports—one in 2000, another in 2001 and the inquiry into the death of Jeremy Williams in 2003—identified problems at the training establishment. The 2003 report, which remains a confidential document, found:

A culture of denigration and harassment existed towards R&D P1 [Recuperation and Discharge] at the time PTE Williams was present in the P1. As a result, members of the P1 were not treated with dignity, respect and sympathy.¹⁸

7.16 The 2003 report noted that 'while denigration of R&D was not universal among junior staff, there was no evidence of steps being taken to stop this culture'.¹⁹

7.17 Although this report found no evidence to support the view that a culture of brutality, bullying and stand-over tactics existed at SOI, it did note that the incidents reported, 'seem to be isolated incidents from differing individuals that highlight inappropriate behaviour by individuals rather than a culture'. It went on to state that there is evidence that a small number of staff members do use the threat of violence and some may have used physical violence on initial employment trainees (IETs). Furthermore, it found that 'cases of violence between IETs have been widely reported and are considered to exist'.²⁰

7.18 The 2003 report noted that, at the time of writing, 'a culture of denigration and harassment of recuperation and discharge (R&D) P1 was not apparent'.²¹ It should be

17 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry: Inquiry into the learning culture in ADF schools and training establishments*, July 2006, paragraph 193.

18 Annex A, Appointing Officer's Decisions and Action Plan Investigation into the Death of 8299931 PTE J.P. Williams, February 2003, pp. 35–6. This document was provided to the committee and is classified as Staff-in-Confidence. The committee has taken great care to ensure that the privacy of any persons referred to in the report has been respected.

19 Annex A, Appointing Officer's Decisions and Action Plan Investigation into the Death of 8299931 PTE J.P. Williams, February 2003, p. 36.

20 Annex A, Appointing Officer's Decisions and Action Plan Investigation into the Death of 8299931 PTE J.P. Williams, February 2003, p. 53.

21 Annex A, Appointing Officer's Decisions and Action Plan Investigation into the Death of 8299931 PTE J.P. Williams, February 2003, p. 37.

noted that the earlier 2001 report reached the same conclusions, yet two years later reports of abuse were occurring.

7.19 Indeed, the investigating officer's report of 2003 referred to the earlier 2001 investigation into the alleged mistreatment of a soldier at SOI in 2000. Importantly, it observed that the earlier report had identified a culture at SOI with distinct similarities to the one it described. Furthermore, the earlier report had accepted that as a result of changes in 2000/01, there was a far more professional and positive attitude at SOI. The 2003 report surmised:

Either the changes and remedial action identified in 2001 were not followed through by the chain of command in 2001, or they were lost in the space of a single posting cycle.²²

7.20 It should be noted that all three reports, 2001, 2003 and the recent audit report asserted that a culture of bullying and harassment did not exist in the respective training establishments. Even so, they could identify 'isolated incidents from differing individuals that highlight inappropriate behaviour by individuals'. The examples taken from the audit report and cited above describing a culture that 'seems to be so judgemental and disrespectful' toward those deemed to be 'on the wrong bus' is of continuing concern to the committee.

7.21 Over three years on from the 2003 report into the death of Jeremy Williams and after much publicity, worrying elements can still be detected in ADF training schools. Despite indications that incidents of disrespect toward, denigration and ostracism of, ADF members deemed to be failures still occur, the committee commends the CDF for commissioning the recent audit and for making public its findings.

7.22 It also notes the firmness and resolve of the CDF in asserting that the military justice system will be improved:

Let me assure you, this is the most comprehensive implementation we have ever had of the military justice system in the ADF. The chiefs and I get a report every month from Admiral Bonser on how the implementation is going. We are leaving no stone unturned. We are totally committed to fixing the system.²³

7.23 The findings of the inquiry into the learning culture in the ADF underscore the need for the ADF to continue, and strengthen, its endeavours to change the culture.

22 Executive Summary, Investigating officer's Report into the Death of 8299931 PTE Jeremy Paul Williams formerly RAINF Initial Employment Trainee School of Infantry, Singleton, on 2 February 2003, p. 7.

23 *Committee Hansard*, 26 February 2007, p. 12.

Assistance to trainees

7.24 The final report of the learning culture inquiry noted that overall, 85% of trainees reported that assistance was available to trainees who fall behind, but that this figure fell as low as 48% in one establishment.²⁴

7.25 The committee sought more information on the establishment where only 48% of trainees believed that assistance was available to trainees struggling to keep up. Neither the CDF nor the Chief of Army was able to answer the question. The committee is waiting for further information to be provided.²⁵ In the meantime, it expresses its concern that, although the report into the learning culture of the ADF identified a problem in at least one training establishment as indicated by the 48% negative response, the ADF could not name the establishment.

Retention rate in training schools

7.26 On a related matter, the committee sought information on the retention figures quoted in the report on the learning culture in the ADF. They indicated that around 3,600 other ranks permanently enlisted in the ADF, with about 900 leaving during their training. They also recorded that of the 650 officers recruited each year to undertake initial officer training around 200 leave during training.

7.27 The CDF was of the view that Defence was 'probably doing better now in terms of the number of people who get through the training process'. He noted that Defence was 'doing a lot to ensure that as many people as possible in the training process stay in the ADF' and gave the following example:

One of the places I would invite you all to go and visit is the Army training command rehabilitation unit, which is collocated with 1HSB at Holsworthy. What you will see there is a state-of-the-art rehabilitation unit which essentially takes young people who are damaged in the training process and, through a very careful process of rehabilitation, returns them back into the training system. Most of them—in fact, in excess of 80 per cent of them—go back and essentially complete their training.

I found it a very uplifting place to visit. I saw young people who had major knee injuries and physical problems with limbs and so on working their way through a very compassionate program of training to restore their ability to do what they wanted with their lives in the ADF. So we are looking in a number of other areas to try to ensure that we save as many of these people as possible. They volunteered to join the Australian Defence Force in one of the three services and I think it is incumbent on us to ensure that all those who want to get through get through and if we have to help them overcome major injuries or some other problem, we will do so.²⁶

24 Department of Defence, *Final Report of the Learning Culture Inquiry*, July 2006, paragraph 69.

25 *Committee Hansard*, 26 February 2007, pp. 15–17.

26 *Committee Hansard*, 26 February 2007, p. 14.

7.28 Even so, the CDF undertook to provide the committee with further information on the retention rate of those undertaking initial training in the ADF.

Conclusion

7.29 The committee has taken a critical look at the findings of a number of recent reports inquiring into the investigative capability in the ADF and the ADF learning culture as well as inquiries into the sudden death of two ADF members. All inquiries exposed deficiencies in procedures and practices. The committee particularly noted the close connection between their findings and those of the committee's 2005 inquiry into Australia's military justice system.

7.30 Although the inquiries exposed failings in the ADF, the committee believes that they have proven to be a valuable incentive toward further moves to improve Australia's military justice system. The committee encourages the CDF to continue the practice of independent review of key aspects of the ADF. The committee also notes the chapter in Defence's Annual Report devoted to the military justice system which includes information such as the Defence Attitude Survey. Again, the committee encourages Defence to continue this type of open reporting.

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