



Royal Commission Update - Wagga Wagga Day 1 - 28 November 2022

RSL References

Positive:

- Reference to National ESO Forum - will continue to listen to this important group

Negative:

NA

Commissioners Opening Remarks

- Reference to National ESO Forum - will continue to listen to this important group
- 2800 submissions - need more
- Reference to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Nov 2022 report

Counsel Assisting Opening Address

- Discussion of AIHW report - need data for before 1985
- Female veterans 2.8 times more likely than general population to die by suicide
- Also very different for male veterans compared to the general population
- It matters how people are discharged - involuntary medical separation at a particularly high rate
- Males serving less than one year also highly at risk
- Need more data covering living members with experience of suicidality
- What can be done now to transform this? Is Defence doing enough? Is DVA doing enough? Need to act now on AIHW report
- Does Defence appropriately take account of peoples varying backgrounds during recruiting and retention in service?
- Recruit culture to be examined, including education of recruits re. unacceptable behaviour
- Will hear from Kapooka commander and commander of Royal Australian Navy recruit school, particularly re. unacceptable behaviour
- BUPA will be examined re recruitment standards and quality of healthcare services provided by ADF
- Evidence will be heard re. ADF Academy (ADFA), focusing on culture, management of reports of unacceptable behaviour, training provide re. unacceptable behaviour and mental health, policy implementation in ADFA, stigma re. seeking support
- Some lived experience witnesses

11:45am - 1:00pm - James Geercke - Lived experience

- Commenced ADFA in 2009 - passed the competitive selection test in 2008 - didn't think he would

pass because other candidates had higher levels of education and had already experienced leadership - was very proud

- Passed medical testing without any trouble - perfect health
- Open Day really sold the benefits of ADFA to recruits - never spoke about difficulties or challenges that might be faced
- Did Bachelor's degree in history and politics - committed to nine years of service - there was a two year grace period where you could leave without repercussions - repercussions after that was repaying the training, which was very expensive
- Fulltime study and military training was very hard - often not well coordinated - could be charged if failing any courses
- Training environment was tough - everyone was stressed by highly demanding environment for years on end
- Charged for small, unjust, impossible or innocuous things i.e. dust in a lightbulb - regularly punished for things that was unachievable i.e. two tasks at the same time - believe this was intended to drive continuous improvement - but was beyond what was necessary - had a large impact on mental health - 'did more harm than good'
- Told that training was designed to be difficult so that it made their brains malleable - told sleep deprivation could have same effect on brain as taking psychedelic substances - were told to keep any negative side effects to themselves, because if it went to psychiatrists, they would get a medical discharge
- Didn't have time to stop and reflect - this behaviour was normalised
- Training at Royal Military College (RMC) Duntroon was more gruelling than ADFA - common for mild hallucinations to happen during sleep deprivation - boy going to shock in cold etc.
- Persevered because wanted to get each other through it as a team
- Believe Army swept this under the carpet - don't offer support for those with PTSD
- Roots of mental health trauma experienced before deployment
- Suicide and suicidality at ADFA - not isolated incidents, but regular occurrences - all younger than 25 - they were promising young people
- Self-harm was common - mental health deteriorated generally
- Same tokenistic follow-up after a suicide - encouraged going to see the chaplains, not the formal channels of psychiatrists - told not to talk to the media
- Recruits attacking other recruits - covered it up - didn't want recruits being discharged because they were stressed - own support system was each
- 'Became one, big, dysfunctional family'
- Drinking, drink driving, self-harm, violence, psychotic episodes
- Consequences for favour were punishment, not helping to get better
- Acted in dangerous ways - drinking, drink driving, violence - didn't seek help due to fear of reprisals, discharge, effect on career prospects - 'not something you did'
- Suffered a spinal injury in 2010 during field exercise - began to hallucinate from the pain - injury stemmed from smaller, unreported injuries - team carried him on a stretcher several kilometres, with team carrying his pack - requested to get off the stretcher and walk but was told to 'shut the f*** up'
 - Suffered incredible pain - still suffers from it until this day
 - Put in truck and taken to hospital in RMC - prescribed pain killers (tramadol) and discharged after a night - given pain killers and told to get on with it - was given some reduces duties
 - No scans, only saw the physio
- Returned to hospital saying pain wasn't going away - increased prescription - ended up on 2gms of tramadol per day - collapsed in the shower - was given a cocktail of pain killers designed to control pain - didn't try to diagnose the pain

- Recruits can be charged if they don't take the medicine prescribed
- Returned to hospital for 3 months - hospital designed to get people out and uncomfortable
- Mother wasn't informed of admission - but eventually came to visit - no one asked can we inform your next of kin
- Mistreated for several conditions, misdiagnosed for rheumatoid arthritis - more and more 'meds' dumped into his body - also used a lot of treatments this time (scans, specialists, allied health) - completely alone and in pain, isolated - spent two weeks as the only patient in the hospital - began to hallucinate
- Other recruits were not permitted to come and see him - had to go AWOL to get a visit
- Self-discharged the hospital and tried to stop taking medication - withdrawals were so severe he ended up back in hospital - left with 10 repeats of each medication (over 1000 pain killers), which was filled immediately by the pharmacy
- Withdrawals - stabbing pain returned, vomiting, hot cold flushes
- Third admission - created lasting issue with hospitals and doctors - couldn't get sleep back on track - brain wasn't functioning properly, struggled to complete university - big challenges following the withdrawals - permanently changes sleep patterns and forms of dreaming
- Was medically discharged the day after graduating university in 2011- not permitted to wear uniform or 'march out' etc. - mixed feelings - didn't know what to do next
- Didn't seek help for mental health after discharge for several years - officers sat him down and said he should try to avoid formal diagnosis because DVA system was so slow, and might affect career prospects
- Sought psychological assistance in 2014, with very limited support from DV - was initially advised irresponsibly by therapist regarding substance abuse issues
 - Didn't seek further help until 2019 - kept getting recommended medical fixes
 - Self-medicating for pain relief
- Negative experience with DVA - DVA didn't permit him to return to the work force until 2016, and in work he couldn't do properly
- In 2019, got 'right help' outside DVA medical fraternity - not medicine-based
- Some cultural differences between military and civilian life he was unprepared for - need this to be explained at discharge
 - Army encouraged risky behaviours, but in the world outside the Army these can get you hurt or killed
 - Took a decade to transition from military to civilian career

Commissioner Questions

- 'I tell everyone who asks me not to join - it takes a bigger toll than you realise - you will see things, you will see things happen to your friends, things I only thought would happen when you went to war'
- RAN has mandatory one year of service before a recruit can join ADFA - seemed less stressed

2:00pm - 5:15pm - Wing Commander Darren Dolan - Commanding Officer, No. 1 Recruit Training Unit, RAAF Base Wagga

Training

- 1000 students a year attend
- No training for RAAF recruits before arriving - all enlisted aviators start at 1RTU, with training lasting 11 weeks - set syllabus
 - 15 recruits per corporal, with 4 corporals under a Sergeant - try to maintain one corporal with each class throughout the course
 - Ratios change depending on the learning course for the day i.e. weapons training is 1:1, physical activities may be 1:15
 - Corporals can spend whole day with recruits, but on other days there may be more external instructors and they won't see them for significant periods
 - Most instructors only see 3 recruits classes per year - self-reporting on wellbeing
- Different physical standard - lower beep test from 6.5 to 5.1 - physical training has changed, resulting in better graduation rates
- Better analysis of data has led to improved training regime, which has improved graduation rates
- Changes to training programs must go through immediate chain of command for some changes - i.e. weapons - other areas there is some license to manoeuvre i.e. physical requirements
- Content generally stays the same - syllabus underwent major reform of content in late 2021 - KPMG were engaged to do the rewrite through stakeholder engagement with the RAAF leadership - one of the lead contractors was an ex-Army training officer
 - No input from recruits on this review
- Stress can increase during some hard skills training (drill), weapons training, academic periods with exams
 - Can change privileges depending on cognitive load on recruits
- Day generally starts at 5am, on the road at 6am, concluding at 1700 - couple of weeks with Saturday and Sunday work, then just Saturday, then no weekend work
 - Thrown in the deep end to make initial transition from civilian to service member - no research behind this
- Each week's focus is different - first weeks is processes, weapons training after the four-week mark, several academic periods per day, at least one physical fitness session per day of 40-80 mins
 - Weapons training is completed in a lump during training at five-six-week mark
 - 16% of the course are spent in classrooms with PowerPoint
- Tough training includes full-kit training, physically demanding training
- Learning management plan broken down into parts, then sub-parts

1RTU

- No training for RAAF recruits before arriving - all enlisted aviators start at 1RTU, with training lasting 11 weeks - set syllabus
 - 15 recruits per corporal, with 4 corporals under a Sergeant - try to maintain one corporal with each class
 - Can return to 1RTU, can return as instructor, but not as student
- Different physical standard - lower beep test from 6.5 to 5.1 - physical training has changed, resulting in better graduation rates
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- Applied to be commander
- Military Skills Instructors (1RTU Corporals and Sergeants) apply because of opportunity to impact new recruits, financial benefits, ability to nominate first preference posting location following teaching posting at 1RTU
- Commander gets a say in who is selected to be an instructor - full screening
- Corporals do nine-week training course to become Military Skills Instructors - 7 weeks hard skills, then other softer skills, then 2 weeks weapon instructor course - full productivity is reached during the second 11-week course
- Minimum tenure is two years, with most applying for four years, before returning to other service
- Recruits when received are destined for their next posting
- No female recruit is in a course without another female recruit
- Purpose of the 1RTU is RAAF ethics and values, military skills, and discipline - teaching understanding of when and when not to speak up
 - Breaking down individuality is not the goal or ideal of training - philosophy is no longer 'breaking down to build them back up' under New Horizon and Pathways to Change
 - Encourage to speak up if they have concerns for wellbeing and/or safety of themselves or others at any time
- Some recruits may be reticent to speak up about wellbeing/safety outside of anonymous surveys - 65-75% would be confident in doing so
- Recruits do syllabus in the same order, except for Reserves
- Set levels for recruit's privileges, including for off-base leave - no scientific inquiry into benefits of this system
- Can also review recruit's standard of performance - different levels of warning
- Every recruit has access to the LuminApp, where recruits can report how they are feeling each day, can track data for both individuals and entire cohorts
 - Can also be used to communicate with an instructor that there is a need to speak to someone - one of a number of strategies
- Course Orderlies - assigned task for the recruits - administrative role, helping in communication

Culture, Values & Ethics and Unacceptable Behaviour

- 1RTU is foundational for culture in the Air Force - the most important part of cultural foundation
- 1RTU has a good reporting and safety culture - better than RAAF as a whole
- Unacceptable Behaviour components have more face-to-face teachings than values and ethics (which is mostly online)
- Where there is borderline unacceptable behaviour, it can depend on what a complainant wants as an outcome
- Agrees equity, diversity and inclusivity should be promoted as a standalone behaviour, not as part of unacceptable behaviour teachings

Poor performance

- Can be conducted at Sergeant or Commander level for recruits
- Instructors can be removed from teaching roles if required

- Commander will see details of report on unacceptable behaviour

Suicide and suicidality at 1RTU

- Was there handover regarding suicide/suicidality? Yes
- Suicide and suicidality is part of the 11-week course
- No modification yet for vulnerable cohorts due to AIHW report during training

Satisfaction in the Workplace Report and Safety Reports - 1RTU

- Shows both an improved reporting culture, and an increase in the number of events reported
- Some of the questions are unclear or ambiguous
- There is value in the report - if nothing else, recruits know they have a voice through the report
 - Has not seen specific reforms as a result of the report
- Significant difference between men and women in terms of reporting of sexual misconduct
- Violent behaviours and sexual abuse are on a flat trajectory between 2019 and 2021
- Bullying saw an increase from 2% to 10% - this followed a re-education of what constitutes bullying among the workforce in 2020, but may also have been an increase in bullying
 - No specific reforms to combat bullying
- Overall steady and low-level of unacceptable behaviour overall

Transition

- All recruits who wish to transition out will be paired with a staff member tasked with assisting during recruitment at RAAF Wagga Wagga - this is offered to the student
- Medical discharge
 - There is an administrative right to respond to the decision to transition a member out medically

Inter-Service

- COs of the training schools in ADF are in regular contact