

Matt Cone

In 2015, while browsing the gay publication *Capital Q*, we stumbled across an 8 March 1996 article entitled 'Seamen charged for sex on ship'. The story described an intriguing case of two sailors, one openly gay, charged for unacceptable sexual behaviour for allegedly trying to engage in oral sex. It was striking how detailed the reports of the Defence Magistrate proceedings were, including naming the accused: Matthew Cone. When we tracked down Matt, he revealed that the incident in the press only grazed the surface of the difficulties he experienced in the Navy as an openly gay man in the 1990s. Matt had not thought about his Navy service for years, and he had never spoken about that part of his life. Revisiting that time was an opportunity finally to confront demons that haunted Matt unknowingly for the last 20 years, and just telling his story was, as Matt put it, an empowering experience.

Matt Cone was born in Scone in the Hunter Valley in 1974. His father was a shearer and then a plant operator in the coal mines, and his mother worked as a swim instructor. Matt remembers, even in his early years, feeling attracted to other guys, though it was not a sexual attraction. He explains how he liked to hold his best friend's hand in primary school, and he would miss him after school. Matt also recalls being fond of a male teacher, feeling a desire or longing that he could not quite explain as same-sex attraction at the time.

Matt had an active childhood and was a keen swimmer. Swimming mates became a big part of Matt's social circle and, as he grew into adolescence, they also became part of Matt's sexual awakening. From about age 13 to 15, Matt used to visit one swimming mate's house almost every day after school, where they used to fool around in the lounge room. They stopped when the mate got a girlfriend, but this did not make Matt's feelings go away. He was heartbroken that the mate moved on, and Matt came to realise that this

was not just about one person: he was sexually attracted to men. Matt found posters of good-looking male singers appealing, and he thought of men when he masturbated. He also continued to long for his mate. After years of rejection from that same mate, Matt finally realised that it was not meant to be, and he became determined to get out of Scone.

When Matt was at a swimming championship in Sydney, the ADF happened to have a stall set up. Matt was 16, about to start Grade 11, and his young life was at a crossroads. A Defence career seemed like a viable option where Matt could learn a trade and see the world. It was Matt's grandfather, a returned serviceman himself, who suggested that Matt join the Navy because he would travel more than in the other services. Matt recalls responding to his grandfather: 'But aren't you a sitting duck? You're sitting out in the water in a bloody ship, and a missile comes at you you're a sitting duck. At least in the Army you run up the hill or hide or something.' When the careers counsellor mentioned that Navy were recruiting more than the other services, Matt was sold and put in the enlistment paperwork. Early in 1992 he received a phone call that he was accepted in the Navy. Matt withdrew from Grade 12 and spent the next few months with his parents before his Navy service commenced.

Matt's start date of 21 July 1992 was just over four months before the Keating government lifted the ban on LGB service. In June 1992 the Defence Minister, Senator Robert Ray, announced that the ban would remain, so there was every indication that gay men such as Matt would have to stay in the closet for the foreseeable future. Matt remembers homosexuality was raised during his recruitment:

What you got to do when you're going through the [recruitment] process and all this, and these were our things we don't accept: criminal record, homosexuality, all that kind of stuff. So it was already in your mind. So you just went in and the psychs are sitting there asking questions, and you answer, you told them what they wanted to hear.

Often recruit training can be a lonely time when sailors have to adjust to a new set of norms, regimentation and discipline. For Matt, recruit school at HMAS Cerberus was quite the opposite: a liberating experience. He had been accustomed to 4 am wake-ups

before school for swim training; getting up every morning for a jog at 6.00am was like a sleep-in. Matt's mother was such a strict disciplinarian that he had no problems whatsoever adapting to Navy life. Matt's athletic upbringing also prepared him well for the fitness standards. He was receiving wages for the first time, and he took full advantage of this newfound freedom.

HMAS Cerberus is about 80 kilometres from Melbourne, so Matt would spend his weekends exploring the city and even regional areas like Bendigo, Ballarat and the Goldfields. It was by accident (or perhaps kismet) that Matt stumbled across the Peel Hotel in Collingwood. Matt watched as two men, one in a crop top, entered the bar, and he followed them inside. Matt was blown away by what he saw: a room full of sexy guys drinking, dancing and showing affection to one another. Matt remembers:

I looked over and there's two guys kissing, and it's like: 'Wow, and you can do this in this room! You can do that without getting abused or punched, or anything like that.' And then I had an experience with a guy that day, and I still remember being very nervous and I went back to his house.

The next morning Matt went back to his hotel feeling shame about this first sexual experience since his high school mate. He kept it to himself when he returned to Cerberus, but that night had opened up a brand-new world.

Matt started visiting gay hangouts and clubs and dressing more flamboyantly, wearing tight Bonds t-shirts, skinny jeans and bracelets. He was conscious that he could be kicked out of the Navy if he were caught. He also knew about the ostracism he could face if there was even a suspicion of being gay. At Matt's recruit school was a guy named Donoghue whom Matt describes as 'obviously gay as a bag of butterflies'. Matt does not recall anyone physically bullying or taunting Donoghue, but there was a lot of gossip behind his back.

There was no chance that poor guy ever had of making a friend. And I felt sorry for him. But I wouldn't befriend him because I'd be part of that then. So, it was guilt by association. So, you kept your distance from him. And the guy had a heart of gold. He was one of the hardest workers, he was nice to everyone, but he had no other option but to go off and sort of side with the girls a bit, hang out with them. So he

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was categorised without his choice, he was just being himself. He didn't ever admit he was gay. They stereotyped him. And then I saw that with a lot of other people, the people who went up and associated themselves with him were then known as the Fag Bag.

Donoghue left the Navy after recruit school. The social ostracism, and the very fear Matt felt, sent a clear message about not only being gay in the Navy, but being *perceived* to be gay. Such a hostile environment sent Matt deep into the closet. Indeed, Matt says that he stopped visiting the Melbourne gay bars and sex shops after only a few weeks.

Carrying the secret of his sexuality set Matt into the double life that so many other servicemen and women had to bear. He was never comfortable with the idea of lying, but he proved adept at weaving stories to cover up his extracurricular activities. The other guys sometimes dragged Matt to brothels, and Matt had to concoct lies to explain why he was not partaking: 'I'd say, "I can't afford one [sex worker]. But I'll look after your stuff. I'll just sit here and wait for you."' Matt set a goal: get through the 12 weeks of recruit school and then the seven weeks of category school, where Matt would train to be a steward. After that, get posted to Sydney.

Matt studied hard at category school; a steward's role was essentially to look after the officers in every way from serving their meals, to doing their laundry, to working the bar at functions. Matt was in the final weeks of category school when, on 23 November 1992, the Keating Government repealed the ban on LGB military service. Matt remembers the news being reported in the magazine *Navy News*, but otherwise there were no formal announcements. When Matt was posted to HMAS Watson in Sydney, it was quite clear that a change in policy did not mean it would be safe for him or other gay sailors to come out. He describes the men at Watson as 'some of the hardest, toughest sailors I'd met, and they [believed] there should be two things that shouldn't be at sea: poofs and women'. Matt remembers one night: 'I had been in a car with a bunch of sailors and they'd driven through Oxford Street one night on the way back out to HMAS Watson and they'd gone past the Albury and they wound their windows down and all yelled out, "Faggot! You're dead cunts!" Horrible words.' On another occasion, he remembers the sailors throwing a beer bottle out the window as they drove down Oxford

Street. The incidents confirmed what Matt already learned at Cerberus: gays were not welcome in the Navy.

These experiences reinforced Matt's decision to continue living a double life even though the rules said he could no longer be discharged for being gay. One night at the Beresford Hotel in Surry Hills, Matt felt a tap on the shoulder: it was one of the cooks from Watson, surprised to see Matt. Matt remembers saying, "I'm bi." He's like, "Really?" I said, "I don't fucking know, Adam. I don't know." And that was the first guy who helped me out ... and through that night I basically came out to him, and said this is what I am'. Adam turned out to be a lifeline; for the first time Matt had a gay friend, and not only that – he was a gay sailor who understood the homophobic work environment. Matt says:

He was living the same thing where he wasn't telling anyone on the base he was gay. He was just going home, going out to these places, putting his baseball cap on and his stylish clothes, you'd hardly recognise him, and living his real life ... It only took that one guy in the Navy to empower me, that I wasn't the only guy in the Navy.

The year 1993 was big for Matt. He came out to his family during a visit home. His parents were accepting and only asked that Matt be discreet when in town. His brothers were uncomfortable about Matt's sexuality at first, but over the next five years they came to accept Matt and even started accompanying him to bars on Oxford Street. Meanwhile, other sailors became cluey about Matt's sexuality because they figured out he was frequenting the gay scene. A disapproving warrant officer had Matt posted to the destroyer *HMAS Derwent* based out of Western Australia. The *Derwent* deployment turned out to be a positive, memorable experience as Matt's first overseas deployment. It was a farewell tour before the ship was decommissioned, visiting Borneo, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Tonga, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa and every Australian state. Matt took full advantage of these travel opportunities, going on treks in the mountains, seeing the orangutans in Borneo, and avoiding some of the seedier sexploits crew members took part in at the various ports.

It was not discussed, but shipmates on the *Derwent* were aware that Matt was not straight. Matt was not the target of specific homophobia, but he did hear casual

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homophobic comments: ““So everything was a poofter,” if they hit themselves with the hammer; “You fucking faggot”, if someone jumped the queue in the meal line, but nothing was aimed at me or anything like that.’ Men regularly wandered around nude in the mess and expressed no signs of discomfort around Matt. The tolerance shown towards Matt continued longstanding patterns about the importance of discretion for gay servicemen to be treated as part of the team. When visiting the Australian ports, Matt would quietly go off to explore the gay bars, usually staying in a hotel room. He says, ‘I was worried about people seeing me or associating me with that kind of stuff [gay culture], because in the DE [destroyer escort] world you could go from hero to zero in no time ... you could be really popular on a ship; something happens, the whole crew just turns their back on you’. Matt would learn this lesson all too well two years later. On this deployment, though, Matt’s crewmates remained respectful. They even pointed out that a sexual tryst Matt had in Hobart was illegal, as Tasmania did not decriminalise male homosexual acts until 1997.

Two major incidents surrounding Matt’s homosexuality stand out in his Navy career, the first of which happened in 1993. The *HMAS Derwent* was hosting a cocktail party in Devonport, Tasmania, for new officers who were joining the crew. Matt was tending the bar and serving drinks. One lieutenant was drunk and as Matt recalls: ‘He walked up and he grabbed me on the cock, like a whole handful and gave it a bit of a rub like that. And I’m like, I was the youngest one at the three people it happened to, and I said, “Sir, come on, that’s enough”’. The same officer went to the ward room and groped two other male stewards, one of whom punched the officer. Another officer witnessed the hit and was going to charge the steward with assaulting a Navy officer, but both stewards retorted that the officer had touched them inappropriately. When they came on deck and told Matt what had transpired, Matt reported that he, too, had been sexually groped. There was an inquiry. Very quickly the *Derwent* was turned around and sent to Sydney, where the officer faced a court martial.

The details of Lieutenant Warren Barry’s court martial appeared in the press. Matt was reported (anonymously) as testifying that Barry ‘put his hand down and grabbed me on the genitals, the penis and testicles, and as soon as he did that I jumped, like stepped back, and then walked off’. The other steward described Barry’s groping as ‘something

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I'd expect my wife to come up and do to me'.¹ Barry's solicitor argued that this was merely drunken misbehaviour, playful fun that sailors (including officers) often got up to, which should have been handled quietly on the ship. The court martial found Barry guilty of two charges of sexual indecency. His sentence: two fines of \$750, as well as forfeiture of 12 months' seniority as punishment for other charges relating to assaulting a senior officer and disobeying a lawful command. Commander Timothy Bloomfield, the Navy's director of public information, stated: 'I think one thing that comes out very clearly from this is that this type of action is not tolerated in the Australian Navy ... I consider this sends a very clear message out to all personnel'.²

The *Derwent* incident never implicated Matt as anything other than a victim, but several sailors subscribed to false stereotypes about gay men being hypersexual objects who welcomed any sexual advances. Matt said in a 1996 interview with *Capital Q*: 'People asked me what the problem was, since I was gay. I had to explain to them that it's [having sex] a matter of choice.'³ Years later the *Derwent* incident would haunt Matt as the first of a series of events that dubbed him a troublemaker.

The entire court martial and its outcome are intriguing given the timing. It was only in June 1992 that the ADF adopted a policy on Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour. Also in 1992, a female reserve medical doctor reported that she had been subjected to significant sexual harassment and even sexual assault on board the *HMAS Swan*. The alleged perpetrator of the sexual assault was found not guilty in a court martial, but the allegations opened floodgates when other women came forward to report sexual harassment on the *Swan*. The Navy established a Board of Inquiry into Sexual Assault Incident on *HMAS Swan*, which found that the Navy was condoning a culture of alcohol consumption and misogyny. Reports reached the media in 1993 about the Navy's mishandling of the *HMAS Swan* sexual assault investigations.

The Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, Senator John Faulkner, set up a Senate Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in the Australian Defence Force. That very inquiry was scheduled to start about a week after Barry's court martial, meaning the ADF's dealings with sexual assault were a topic of public interest. Incidentally, there was only one submission to the Sexual Harassment Inquiry which pointed out that 'the

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incidents of sexual harassment [sic] and discriminatory behaviour within the Australian Defence Force are not confined to heterosexual incidents only. Incidents of sexual harassment [sic] against homosexual service personnel are continuing whether directly or indirectly'. The submission by openly gay RAAF Sergeant Mark Livingstone even mentioned the *Derwent* incident as a clear example of such sexual harassment.

The ADF was combatting an image problem relating to sexual assault and mishandled investigations; the Barry court martial represented an opportunity to show that it was 'doing something'. Yet, the public example to send a 'clear message' was not about sexual harassment of women, but rather related to *homosexual* misconduct. Barry's behaviour was inappropriate, but his case did not challenge the embedded misogynistic culture within the Navy. This was only one year after the ban on LGB service had been lifted, and as Matt's story and others of the era suggest, there was still a strong underlying homophobic culture. Matt remembers, for example, that one time when he cut himself the medical staff yelled: 'Don't fucking touch him! He might have AIDS!' Several of the submissions to the Senate Sexual Harassment Inquiry contained homophobic statements (and even more submissions blamed sexual harassment on the Navy's decision to allow women on ships). Thus, prosecuting an officer for homosexual misconduct was unlikely to provoke outcry among the ranks of the ADF.

The notion that homosexual misconduct was more transgressive than heterosexual misbehaviour affected Matt more seriously in 1995–96. Matt was one of two openly gay men serving on board the HMAS Melbourne. Similar to the *Derwent*, Matt had not come across any blatant homophobia, but also he continued to be discreet about how he talked about his sexuality. On the night of 5 November 1995, the ship was docked in Melbourne and several crew members went to a pub. Matt's crewmate Dean (name changed) was asking him questions about what it was like being gay. Things turned odd when Dean followed Matt into the men's room and tried to kiss him. A petty officer walked in as Matt was pushing Dean away and advised Matt: 'That guy's chasing you, and I've just told him he's getting fucking married, and to stay away from you.' Matt returned to the ship as ordered and went to bed.

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The sleeping arrangements on the *Melbourne* were mess alcoves where there were two sets of three bunk beds, each with a curtain. Matt was in the bottom bunk and the two above him were empty because the sailors were on leave. Directly across, the top bunk was empty; the sailor on the middle bunk, Stevo, had just gone to bed, and the person on the bottom bunk was passed out drunk. Around 1 am, Dean returned to the ship drunk and shook Matt awake, soliciting him for a sexual act. The events of the next ten minutes are murky and the first-hand accounts from Matt and Stevo conflict. Where their statements align is that Matt told Dean to go away. Matt said in a police interview a few weeks later that they merely had a conversation about personal problems affecting Dean; when pressed, Matt said, 'It was a homosexual conversation as in an inquiry, if you like.' In his oral history interview nearly 22 years later, Matt was more candid.

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Dean said, 'How about it?' and I said, 'No, Dean', I said, 'You're [getting] married.' Like this. And I was only whispering exactly like I'm saying now. And I said, 'This can't happen, mate. My boss is on to it.' And I said, 'It's not right.' And then next minute his hands come down under the curtain and he's grabbing my dick like that and that's, I grabbed his hand and I pushed it through the curtain. I said, 'No, mate.'

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Stevo could not see everything behind the curtain and could only interpret what he heard. His signed police statement said that after Matt resisted Dean's initial advances:

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Dean and Matty continued to talk for some time and I heard what appeared to be the sound of kissing. I rolled over and my bunk curtain open slightly and I saw Dean cradling Matty's face and kissing him on the mouth, the kissing continued for around 10 minutes then Dean reached in under Matty's curtain and appeared to have his hand in Matty's groin area, Dean's right arm was moving in an up and down motion and they continued to kiss both of them also continued to moan, Dean continued to move his arm and down and Matty said to Dean, don't waste it, don't waste.

Stevo coughed, turned on his bunk light and opened his curtain, startling Dean and scaring him off. In Stevo's version of events, he then went for a smoke and had a short exchange of words with Matt when he returned. Stevo alleged that Matt said: 'You try putting up with it, it happens all the time when he comes back off the piss he puts his dick in through my curtains ... Relax we don't suck hetro's dicks'. Matt's police interview had a different recollection: Stevo returned upset and said he did not want to live in that

mess anymore, to which Matt replied, “whatever Stevo, we’ll talk about it in the morning.” I was still unaware of what he was upset about, I thought it was the conversation [with Dean about homosexuality]’.

The available documents all suggest that Stevo genuinely believed that Matt and Dean had engaged in a sexual act. How and why he came to this conclusion would become part of the investigation, and how it played out reveals a lot about the homophobic culture that lay just below the surface in the Navy. Stevo wrote in his police statement that after the incident: ‘I went back to bed and because I was scared of being bashed I kept my head out so. I could see if they were going to come back and get me because of what I had seen.’ Matt questions the veracity of this statement, pointing out that Stevo was a very big guy: ‘You would never have mucked with him. I was scared of him.’ Stevo reported that he ran into Dean in the shower the next morning, and Dean offered to pay him to keep quiet. Stevo said he did not intend to report the incident, but over the next few days he discussed it with several people. The incident rapidly reached the attention of the officers on *HMAS Melbourne*.

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Matt received word that he was confined to quarters as the *Melbourne* sailed back to Sydney. Upon arrival, as he recalls it: ‘[I] got called up to the gangway, and “You’re off the ship.” So I was like “No way, this is ridiculous. Can you tell me why?” “No, you’ll get further orders. Just stand by to stand by, but ring [HMAS] Kuttabul police by this afternoon if you haven’t heard anything”’. Later that day Matt received word that he was being put on leave with pay and a solicitor had been arranged. He still did not know what was going on. The next day Matt had to return to the ship dressed in full uniform to face a captain’s table. The coxswain, who also happened to be gay, read out two charges: unacceptable sexual behaviour, and prejudicial behaviour. These charges could land Matt with up to nine months in a military prison. The captain then said: ‘Get off my ship, this is going to the Defence Force Magistrate.’ Sending this to a Defence Force Magistrate was an extreme move. Cases of this nature were most often dealt with by a ship’s captain. Matt later commented to *Capital Q*: ‘It should have been handled at a lower level. They must have really wanted to go after this case.’

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Matt was devastated, and he felt even more awkward when he attended his first meeting with the ADF reserve lawyer and saw Dean there as well. They were being represented jointly and, in the solicitor's opinion, their best defence was to stick together. The solicitor case was to challenge Stevo's reliability: there was poor lighting, he was tired, only heard mumbling and could not see what was happening. The solicitor was doing his job to provide the best defence possible for his clients, and at the time Matt agreed to go along with this approach. On reflection, Matt sees the defence strategy as part of the wider injustice.

I should have, in hindsight, put up my hand and said, 'No, hang on. Let me set you straight. This man here, I'm sitting here with, he did this stuff to me, and he's trying to get away with it to protect his wife, and the military's helping him because he's a leading seaman, and he's quite well respected and his knowledge is invaluable to the military and I'm just a fucking shit kicker, and you just want to get the poof out, because it's all too much.'

The Defence Force Magistrate's case would not be heard until March 1996; in the intervening four months, Matt was permitted to return to the *Melbourne* on light duties. That time was rife with homophobia and psychological trauma, as almost the entire ship turned against Matt. They treated him as the guilty party: the gay man who seduced the poor straight, engaged guy. Matt was not allowed to stay on board at night, though Dean was. He regularly received taunts such as: 'Troublemaker', 'Shit breaker', 'I knew fags wouldn't work on this fucking ship', 'Should never be in the Navy', 'able seaman, able seaman, are you able to swallow semen? You won't'. His boss treated him awfully and at one point said: 'We sail in a week, mate. Make sure they don't cement your feet and throw you upside because this is getting bigger than Ben Hur.' Matt received anonymous phone calls with the message that he would go missing. Matt was terrified during this period, both of the threats he was receiving and of the possible outcomes of the Defence Force Magistrate's case. He was put on medication for insomnia and anxiety.

Matt's only support network came from his gay friends, and they put him in touch with a reporter at *Capital Q*. The journalist considered what was happening to Matt to be an injustice and promised to follow the case to drum up support from the gay community. The *Capital Q* coverage very accurately reflects the proceedings from the transcript of

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the Defence Force Magistrate. The prosecution focused on Stevo's testimony, and the defence argued that with the poor lighting, curtains and tiredness, Stevo was relying on innuendo rather than what he actually saw. Moreover, given how public the mess space was, it would be odd for Dean to perform a sexual act there.

The defence raised Matt's homosexuality in an interesting way. Matt's solicitor asked Stevo whether he used words like 'faggots' and had spoken derogatorily about gays. The prosecution objected to this line of questioning, and the Defence Force Magistrate indicated that he did not consider Stevo's previous comments or attitude towards homosexuality to be relevant. Matt's solicitor had to clarify that he was not arguing that Stevo made up the incident because he was homophobic. Rather, the solicitor argued:

In my respectful submission, he [Stevo] has – even though this case isn't about homosexuality – but he has, in my respectful submission, some concern about homosexuals and it's perhaps that suspicious mind, the knowledge that Cone is a homosexual, it's a dark situation and he assumes something that then becomes something ending in this kissing allegation.

Matt's defence solicitor emphasised that the case was not about homosexuality, later stating: '[Cone] says quite openly, made no secret of the fact that he was homosexual, but no-one took that as – he wasn't sort of flaunting the fact and didn't make a fuss about it, but that's the way he is, and it's really not an issue in the case.' The solicitor's comment about Matt not 'flaunting' his homosexuality highlights that a gay man just living an openly proud life was marked for ostracism.

The fact that neither the magistrate nor solicitors were even willing to consider the case to be about homosexuality speaks volumes about how defensive the ADF was about its treatment of homosexuals. They would not even countenance the notion that one sailor took advantage of another because he was gay; nor would they consider that homophobia may have influenced witness attitudes or how the captain and other authorities reacted. A Navy spokesperson reported to *Capital Q* that sexual matters were a small percentage of charges relating to prejudicial behaviour, insisting that such charges were blind to

sexuality. It is hard to see Matt's case as about anything but homosexuality given the escalation of the case and the treatment Matt endured. He reflects:

Twenty years down the track I'm starting to say, 'Why was I charged?' I never realised it, but why did I face these charges? Dean should have faced charges for coming home and unacceptably sexually touching me, attempting to touch me in what case that I should have been protected, but I wasn't. I was treated as the person, because I was gay, I was treated as the person who did it. 'He's gay, yeah, he must have.'

The Defence Magistrate accepted that there was reasonable doubt and found both Matt and Dean not guilty, though in his ruling he described Stevo as having 'impressed me as a responsible and truthful young man'. Just this comment left a sting with Matt that bothers him to this very day: 'And I was insulted. I was standing there and I thought, "You fucking asshole. That's bullshit. What about me?"'

Though he was found not guilty, the case still tarnished Matt's career and would affect his mental health for life. He was not allowed to resume duties on the *Melbourne* and instead was posted at the submariner's base HMAS Platypus in Sydney. It was a terrible time.

My boss over there absolutely hated me; I was a troublemaker. I'd say, 'What do you want me to do today?' and he goes, 'You may as well just play solitaire.' And was just rude to me, and he warned everybody else on the base 'I've got this nut job here. He's a gay guy, and he's been through this big thing', so he breached all security ... No one wanted to talk to me, no one would do anything for me.

Because Matt had gone to the media, the Defence hierarchy was touchy and wanted to restrict his access to the gay community. He was often rostered on weekend nights; he fronted questions about what he was doing on the weekend, where he was going, whom he was seeing. Rumours abounded that Matt had lied about the incidents on both the *Derwent* and the *Melbourne*.

There was a final incident that proved to be the last straw in Matt's career. During his time on both the *Melbourne* and [at](#) Platypus, he had befriended a gay medical officer, with whom he used to party at Oxford Street nightclubs. One night the doctor offered

Matt a tablet, telling him that it would neutralise the effects of ecstasy so that he could pass any random drug test. When Matt's housemate came home late that night he saw the doctor having sex with Matt – except the next morning Matt said nothing had happened; they had simply come home and passed out. Initially, Matt brushed it aside but over the next couple of weeks similar things continued happening: Matt would take ecstasy and a drug to neutralise the effects. When he awoke the following morning he found lube in his crotch or could smell a condom. This went on for about three or four months before Matt pieced together that the doctor was sexually assaulting him. One morning after one of these nights, Matt's housemate insisted that he go to a clinic on Oxford Street and order a toxicology report. The two pills the medical officer had been giving Matt were Temazepam and Rohypnol – a sleeping agent and a known date rape drug.

Being sexually assaulted was traumatic enough, but the fallout when Matt confronted the doctor was devastating. The doctor denied that he had administered date rape drugs or sexually assaulted Matt. When Matt threatened to report the doctor to the Navy, he retorted with words that, sadly, turned out to be prophetic: 'They won't believe you.' Matt reported the rape to his divisional officer, who responded: 'So we've got the cocktail party in Devonport, we've got the Defence Force Magistrate, now we've got a doctor who raped you. This is the littlest fucking vile thing in the world.' The divisional officer said he would produce a form that, if Matt signed it, would mean his discharge in three weeks. Traumatized, ashamed and even blaming himself for all that had happened, Matt signed the form and was discharged three weeks later in August 1997, having served just over five years.

Matt's mental health was affected by his time in the Navy: the homophobia, sexual assault, verbal abuse and general sense of isolation and shame. Matt moved to Cairns, where he spent almost 12 years working in hospitality, first at the gay resort Turtle Cove (managed by the partner of a gay Vietnam veteran) and doing other jobs in pubs, restaurants and on fishing trawlers. Matt hit the grog heavily, and at the time of his interview Matt said that he has only gone 14 days out of the 20 years since leaving the Navy without drinking. He reduced his alcohol consumption by replacing it with another substance: marijuana. Matt clearly sees the Navy as changing him, and not for the better: '[Before I joined up] I was an elite athlete. I didn't drink, I was about fitness, getting up,

running every morning; I was about being into the body beautiful and being ready to hit the world. And I turned into this miserable lump.'

Matt's mental health problems also affected his relationships. Matt was in a 14-year relationship that was mutually destructive. He was prone to bursts of anger; his partner could also be verbally and emotionally abusive, yet his partner also would talk about how proud he was that Matt was an ex-sailor. Matt's partner did not know about what happened during his service because he never spoke to anyone about it. Matt sometimes went to see counsellors about his relationship and anger, but he would never open up about his time in the Navy. When they gave advice that Matt found challenging, he would simply move on – 'doctor shopping', as he put it.

Matt moved to Port Macquarie in 2009 when his mother was unwell, and he continued to take chef jobs while also accessing Centrelink welfare on and off. He worked for two years as a carer for his father before he passed away in 2016. It was only then that Matt finally saw a doctor to whom he spoke about all the trauma that he experienced during his five years in the Navy. The doctor filled out a form for the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) that stated: 'I believe he has PTSD and depression and anxiety, and I'm treating him for disorders, and I've sent him to a referral for a psych.' The psychologist concurred with the diagnosis, and Matt received a white card from DVA. Matt's white card covers any services relating to mental health, including anti-depressants or other medications. Matt is also in the process of applying for a DVA pension.

It has really been in the past two years, since the death of Matt's parents, that he has begun to heal. About five years ago he met his current partner. What has made this relationship more successful than previous ones is that Matt trusts him more, and Matt has begun to confront the demons that have haunted him since his Navy days. Matt says: 'It's the first ever relationship I've had where it's, I've been honest, so that's made a world of difference. Because you're a bit empowered, you've got someone else, you saw him come in, and he'd like, there's this guy coming to help you.' Matt has also turned to a mate who has experience working with the DVA in the hopes of receiving some recognition or compensation for the trauma he suffered.

Reflecting on his own time of service was been a painful yet liberating experience for Matt. He knows that he had it rough in the 1990s, and he knows that other gays, lesbians and bisexuals who served during that era faced a lot of homophobia. He also knows that 20 years later, the experiences of LGBT personnel have improved immensely. That does not take away from the pain that he has endured, but he does reflect on why he and so many other LGBT people have served.

They expect a gay guy to be, or a woman, to be in the jobs that the straight world chooses for them. Hairdresser. Supermarket attendant. Waitress in Bondi. Waiter in Bondi. They want you to be all that. But when you look back and you think of, there's people out there that are dealing with who they are, and what they are, totally different to everyone else, and they have got to go into a team environment, we're in a family environment, and they're willing to sacrifice their life for their country. That's not a job: that's something that they're willing to do, that's signing your life over to Her Majesty, the day you join the Navy. You're willing to die for your country. And, if anything, you should be, you should feel proud. I never have, but to anyone that's doing it, that's the way it should be.

¹ Kathleen Hickie, 'Officer Grabbed Me Like My Wife: Sailor', *Sydney Morning Herald* (2 December 1993): 5.

² Kathleen Hickie, '\$1,500 Fine for Naval Officer's Indecency', *Sydney Morning Herald* (6 December 1993): 2.

³ [Karen Hill, 'Open Season on Able Seaman', *Capital Q* \(29 March 1996\): 4.](#)