

North Van man takes aim at abusive cadet officers

By Kevin Gillies

The kids have grown up and moved on.

Now North Van's Bill White has time for a new cause — one he's been working on for more than two years and one he's been living with for more than three decades.

At 42 years of age, White is about to become the public face of a class action lawsuit involving more than 65 men who, as young teenagers, were sexually abused at the hands of their sea cadet superiors with the Royal Canadian Sea Cadet Corps at the HMCS Discovery in Stanley Park.

'Cadets to prison'

In 1968, White was 13 years old and looking for a direction in life. His stepfather was in the navy and White was intrigued by military life.

He and his friend Don (not his real name) joined the sea cadets that year not knowing that the next three years would resonate for the rest of their lives.

"I wanted to get into the

navy," White explains, carefully recalling his early teen history with the sea cadets while sitting in his North Van City rental suite.

"I loved being in my uniform. I wanted to do something for my country. It was my lifelong dream."

But commanding officers took advantage of the vulnerable teens, using alcohol, pornography and their positions of power to sexually assault them.

"They'd take you out to a boathouse, or out on a boat or to their personal houses," White recalls. "Then they'd break out the booze."

White recalls at least 30 instances of abuse by commanding officers, and says the events not only quashed any desire to proceed in the navy, they directed him into a downward spiral of anger, rebellion and, ultimately, trouble.

"It screwed me up right away," he admits. "I went right from sea cadets to prison."

After the cadets, White was arrested for a series of armed robberies of gas stations with a machete.

"There was no listening to authority after that," White said of the effect his cadet experiences had. "I was alcoholic by 15."

Eventually, he ended up raising his two sons — when his estranged wife could not — both of whom have now grown to the point that they've left home. "I straightened myself out when I raised my boys (now 19 and 20 years old). I raised them the last 12 years."

Courting justice

These days White collects every newspaper clipping and hangs on every word of television news broadcasts, following the criminal trials of his former mentors and any case remotely similar.

"While we were thinking about how we were going to approach (the case)," White reflected, "these other guys went public."

To date four Royal Canadian Sea Cadet Corps commanding officers have



been named as sexually abusive toward cadets, aged 13 to 16 years, with three facing criminal charges in the case. They include Ralph Bremner, 54; Conrad Sundman, 49; and Richard Wilson, 78. Clarence Anderson has since passed away.

Last year Bremner was convicted of four counts of indecent assault and was sentenced to nine months prison, which he now serves out of his house.

"I wasn't very happy when I found that out," says Don, who went through the entire experience with White. "I guess you could say I was downright pissed off."

Don is one of the anonymous victims but is active in legal proceedings.

This year Sundman pleaded guilty to three and 13 counts of indecent assault. He returns to B.C. Supreme court in a month.

"The sentencing is adjourned until January 2 because material from Alberta, from doctors in Alberta, has not yet arrived," said North Vancouver prosecutor Mark Rowan, who is prosecuting the Sundman and the Bremner cases.

Wilson is on trial for five charges from the 1970s.

Last month White and his lawyer filed a class-action civil suit with the B.C. Supreme court, naming White as the sole plaintiff and the Attorney General of Canada as the sole defendant.

"With regard to class-action suits, you proceed with one plaintiff and then you get certification," said Robert Gibbens, White's lawyer. "We've got several people. I had to choose who was going to be the nominal plaintiff in the class action."

Gibbens added, "We've gone with him (White) because, I think, his story is probably the best (for the suit). It's emblematic of a lot of the stories that have happened."

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The suit alleges the federal government was responsible because they not only put the predators in charge of children, but they also had nothing in place to deal with the abuses, or any treatment after the fact. Now the two are looking for more former cadets to join the suit.

White's class-action suit is the second one filed in this tragic case.

MEMOIR — The hat still rests on the back of White's door.



In the first class-action suit, three other victims are named as plaintiffs in a suit against the three living officers, the estate of the dead fourth officer and the Department of National Defence.

"I should tell you that this action is a little differ-

ent," Gibbens said of White's case.

"There are a couple of other actions on the civil side where people are suing individually against a couple of the officers out there. You get into problems with regard to deep pockets, of course, in those situations.

"The problem that emerged out there was a lot larger, and the federal government's responsibility is highlighted in our statement of claim."

Gibbens says that once the certification comes, all cadets are, by definition, part of the suit.

"I'm waiting for the statement of defence from the federal government," he said. "They've asked for a little extra time. Probably (in the) early spring we'll be going for

certification."

Gibbens says White's suit has a better chance of success because it is modeled after the sexual assault case against the federal government at the former Jericho Hill school for the deaf. It was certified, Gibbens says, and therefore set a precedent.

Wounds still open

White said several of his friends were assaulted between 1968 and 1971.

Several, he said, don't want to talk about it.

They have families and jobs that would be disrupted by the dark revelations of their past.

But, he said, "There's a lot of guys sitting around, just like me, that don't know where to turn."

"I think (that) what a lot of guys want is closure. Now that the wound's open again, they want it closed again. I think anger's just part of it."

Don certainly has the anger, 30 years later.

"I can vouch that a lot of this shit happened," he said.

"I was involved with some of the things involving Willy — a witness."

Don, who threw up the first time he witnessed a sexual assault of his friend, said the memories are still fresh.

"It was a long time ago," Don concludes.

"But, trust me, it isn't forgotten." *