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Defence chief demands end to helicopter 'cowboy' culture

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A CULTURE of risk-taking and sloppy safety standards exists in the army's elite helicopter squadron, according to a damning report by a military inquiry into the fatal crash of a Black Hawk helicopter off Fiji in 2006.

The scathing assessment of the Sydney-based 171 Squadron was in part based on evidence of a number of similar incidents, including the crash of a Black Hawk in East Timor last year that was kept under wraps by Defence because it was "not newsworthy".

Headed by the former Supreme Court judge David Levine, QC, the board of inquiry was convened last year to examine the crash of Black Hawk 221, which smashed into the deck of HMAS Kanimbla before tumbling into the Pacific Ocean and sinking on November 29, 2006.

The pilot, Captain Mark Bingley, and SAS Trooper Joshua Porter died in the accident.

The final report of the inquiry was handed to the Chief of Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston - a decorated helicopter pilot - six months ago.

He is said to have been appalled by its revelations. The *Herald* understands that, after reading it, he dubbed senior pilots from 171 Squadron "cowboys" and launched an audit of all of Defence's helicopter fleets to ascertain if the problems were more widespread.

Sources familiar with the report say it finds that senior pilots in 171 Squadron, while highly trained, had a culture of aggressive flying and a tendency to needlessly "push the envelope".

Safety procedures were slack and the reporting of incidents involving engine failures and other safety breaches was haphazard, it says.

The crash on HMAS Kanimbla occurred while Australian troops were stationed off Fiji preparing to remove Australians if the civil unrest there worsened. They undertook training exercises while they waited for a possible call to action.

In a helicopter packed with Special Air Service soldiers, Captain Bingley was attempting a special operations assault drill, flying at high speed before suddenly turning and "flaring" into a hover above the ship, with the helicopter's nose up, so soldiers could descend by rope or fire weapons.

The inquiry concluded that the exercise was highly dangerous, given the tailwind, the heavy cargo, HMAS Kanimbla's drift in the sea and the fact that it had not been rehearsed at a slower pace.

The report finds that Captain Bingley misjudged the strength of the tailwind.

The crash resulted from an overstressed engine losing power, leading to catastrophic "main rotor droop", a dramatic slowing of the rotor's blades.