VC winner accused of abusing Afghans

Australia's most decorated modern soldier is facing accusations that he mistreated unarmed Afghans and assaulted and bullied his comrades.

The allegations against Ben Roberts-Smith, 39, a former corporal with Australia's SAS who holds the Victoria Cross, Medal for Gallantry and Commendation for Distinguished Service, have rocked the country's defence and political establishment. Two portraits of him have pride of place in the national war memorial.

Allegations against the former trooper published by The Sydney Morning Herald include that he was violent towards Afghan prisoners, bullied two junior soldiers in his patrol, and that teams under either his direct or deputy leadership mistreated unarmed Afghans. It is also alleged that a member of his patrol killed an Afghan who appeared to be unarmed and who approached an SAS observation post, though it is not clear who gave the order.

The claims have come from SAS veterans, including some who served with Roberts-Smith. Some claim that they witnessed him punching one soldier in the head after he made a mistake on the battlefield.

Internal complaints were made against him by at least one soldier over "years of bullying" that affected his mental health, according to the Herald.

The claim was resolved by mediation. Last month, the newspaper revealed that soldiers had been questioned by a judge conducting a secret official inquiry on behalf of the defence force inspector-general into allegations of war crimes in Afghanistan committed by some members of the elite special forces. It said that "special forces insiders" had confirmed that some of the allegations were levelled at patrols led by Roberts-Smith. About 200 witnesses so far have been summoned to give evidence or provide documents and imagery.

Since leaving the SAS, Roberts-Smith has become a celebrated figure who was named chairman of the Australia Day council in 2015 as well as deputy chairman of a prime ministerial advisory council on the mental health of defence veterans.

On Sunday, his lawyers asked the government to refer the leaked details of an inquiry into him to the police for criminal investigation. They said Roberts-Smith was concerned that confidential government information had been passed to the Herald and to The Age in Melbourne, both owned by Fairfax Media.

In a statement, Roberts-Smith, now a senior television executive, vigorously denied the allegations. He described the Herald's reports of his conduct in Afghanistan as a catalogue of lies and misrepresentations.
In an interview with The Australian, published at the weekend, he addressed some of the battlefield allegations against his men, including the shooting of a young Afghan. He said the man was a "spotter" for the enemy and had died holding an explosive device.

A series of investigations has fractured the tight ranks of the SAS and special forces, setting members and former members against each other.

Roberts-Smith has previously criticised the decision by Lieutenant-General Angus Campbell, who was the chief of the army, to commission an inquiry into the SAS. "I don't think these soldiers should be suffering through this ridiculous notion of being investigated for a rumour," The West Australian reported him saying in October. - The Times

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CAPTION:

Ben Roberts-Smith, 39, a former corporal with Australia's SAS who holds the Victoria Cross, is accused of being violent towards Afghan prisoners and bullying two junior soldiers in his patrol. FAIRFAX

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