

'Don't strip my dead son's award from us'

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The father of a commando killed by a Taliban rocket attack in Afghanistan says if the Chief of Defence Force Angus Campbell wants to revoke his son's meritorious service award, he can "collect it himself from my son's gravestone".

Felix Solomon Sher, the father of Private Gregory Michael Sher, wrote to General Campbell urging him to reconsider his decision to strip the Meritorious Unit Citation from 3000 special forces task group members to reflect their "collective responsibility" for alleged war crimes committed by 25 soldiers.

But General Campbell said the decision had been made and would not be reversed.

Amid growing anger in the special forces community, preparations are under way for an online petition protesting the decision to be presented to federal parliament.

It also emerged the government set the wheels in motion to strip the citation from special forces members who served in Afghanistan five months ago — before Defence had even seen the Brereton war crimes report.

Private Sher, a reservist from the untarnished 1st Commando Regiment, was killed at a forward operating base in Oruzgan province in January 2009, well before the majority of alleged war crimes identified by NSW Supreme Court judge Paul Brereton in his four-year inquiry.

Mr Sher keeps his son's Meritorious Unit Citation in a framed display above the insignia that soldiers wear on the right side of their chest.

"If he wants it back, he can come and collect it himself from my son's gravestone," Mr Sher told The Australian.

Mr Sher's letter, co-written with Ray Palmer, whose son Private Scott Travis Palmer was killed in Afghanistan in a June 2010 helicopter crash, asked General Campbell why 99.3 per cent of special forces soldiers who served in Afghanistan were being punished for the actions of just 0.7 per cent.

"Many will see this action as particularly unjust if commanders who were decorated for their command and leadership with distinguished service awards get to keep theirs, whilst junior soldiers lose theirs," they wrote.

The decision was "a particularly brutal blow to the families of those who, like us, have lost someone in this war".

"The mere act of removing a decoration from display cabinets is not one they should have to endure," the fathers said.

A website has been set up by unnamed former special forces operators to collect names for a petition to "maintain the memory of our meritorious many". It asks supporters to include their contact details so they can be sent the petition when it is ready to sign.

General Campbell announced last week he had accepted Justice Brereton's recommendation that he request the Governor-General to revoke the Meritorious Unit Citation for all special forces task groups who served in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2013.