

Army sued on gay hate scandal



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Illustration: Matt Golding.

VICTIMS of a Facebook hate page that exposed and threatened gay members of the Australian military have launched legal action over the army's handling of the scandal.

At the same time, Defence Minister Stephen Smith has confirmed that "a small number of allegations of assault against gay or lesbian personnel" are included in a report on complaints of abuse in the Australian Defence Force.

Australia has allowed gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military since 1992, but an ADF advocate for gay rights, Stuart O'Brien, told *The Sunday Age* that recruits were still concerned about declaring their homosexuality.

Five ADF personnel, including army psychologist Paul Morgan, were outed on a Facebook page in 2010 for making a "filthy lifestyle decision".

Former soldier Marcus Andrew Georgiou created the page to expose serving and past members of the ADF for being "bum bandits". The page had links to violent and pornographic YouTube video clips showing homosexuals being executed.

Mr Georgiou avoided jail after a Sydney magistrate found he was suffering from post-traumatic stress after seeing a fellow soldier fall to his death during a peacekeeping mission in the Solomon Islands.

Victims of the Facebook page are outraged that the army merely placed a note on the files of 31 serving members who accessed the material.

"They've been given less than a slap on the wrist," said lawyer John Davey, who is pursuing legal action against the army on behalf of the Facebook victims.

He said his clients believed the treatment of their complaint "is symptomatic of indifference to gay hate language in the army. After two years they have lost confidence in the army to take this seriously."

A Defence spokeswoman said an internal investigation had found "the vast majority" of members who signed up to the Facebook page were unaware it was aimed at vilifying gays.

"Any future involvement in vilification or other unacceptable behaviour by these members would likely result in disciplinary and/or administrative action being taken against them," the spokeswoman said.

A spokesman for Mr Smith defended the army's handling of the complaint.

"Defence's investigation found that there was no evidence to suggest that ADF members who accessed the Facebook page had any involvement with the authoring of the material," he said.

The spokesman confirmed that "a small number of allegations of assault against gay or lesbian personnel" were contained in DLA Piper's report on complaints of abuse within the ADF.

Mr Smith received the second volume of the report last month, but details of the allegations will not be made public for privacy reasons.

■ About 4000 people, led by openly gay actress Magda Szubanski, rallied at the State Library yesterday to call on the federal government to legalise same-sex marriage, following US President Barack Obama's declaration last week that he supported gay marriage.

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