

Navy chaplain ends 19-day hunger strike

Lieutenant says he advocated for, did not impose on, sailors' rights

By Kelly Kennedy
TIMES STAFF WRITER

When Navy Chaplain (Lt.) Gordon Klingenschmitt broke on Jan. 7 a 19-day hunger strike he started in protest against the Navy, it was just the most recent salvo in a long line of protests he's launched against the service, complaining about what he is allowed and not allowed to do.

Klingenschmitt, an evangelical Episcopal priest, began his water-only diet Dec. 20 because he said the Navy precluded him from praying "in Jesus' name" while in uniform, saying he would end his hunger strike when the "president gave me my uniform and let me pray in Jesus' name."

"Today is that day," he announced in front of the White House, before breaking his fast with a communion wafer. "I have been granted the religious liberty today to pray in uniform."

But Navy officials said nothing had changed since the beginning of Klingenschmitt's fast.

"No one ever, ever told him he couldn't pray in uniform," Navy spokesman Lt. William Marks said. "It wasn't any one person's decision — it's just the regulation." The regulation states military chaplains may pray in public in uniform, but they can't lobby for a cause in uniform, Marks said.

At issue, originally, was what Klingenschmitt said was his right to lead evangelical Episcopalian prayers, rather than nonsectarian prayers, on the guided-missile cruiser Anzio as ship's chaplain when speaking to sailors of all faiths. Klingenschmitt said he was punished after being asked to lead "Jewish prayers," which he ended with "in Jesus' name."

Klingenschmitt, who has been in the military for 14 years, said

he has received a letter of instruction, a downgraded fitness report and a negative letter of recommendation telling a Navy board to end his career.

"Many sailors felt Chaplain Klingenschmitt over-emphasized his own faith system and provided poor pastorship to sailors of other faith groups," wrote his commander, Capt. J.M. Carr, in a letter Klingenschmitt provided.

That letter ended with, "Progress has been noted, and several achievements merit praise, but it will require more time to evaluate his success with more confidence."

Carr's letter does not say Klingenschmitt should not be extended, but it says Carr would not request to serve with Klingenschmitt again.

'Don't pit me against the sailors'

Klingenschmitt was asked Jan. 11 if he felt he imposed on sailors of other faiths' rights when he prayed in Jesus' name every night over the ship's loudspeaker. "Don't pit me against the sailors," he told Navy Times. "I was advocating sailors' rights by asking that sailors of all faiths be allowed to say the evening prayer."

When that request was denied, Klingenschmitt said he continued to pray Jewish prayers in Jesus' name every night in his role as the ship's only chaplain. Marks said Klingenschmitt has every right to pray in his own faith, but since 1998, chaplains have been asked to make their prayers inclusive.

"In public events, which are not divine services, chaplains of all faiths are asked to pray in a manner that does not exclude others," Marks said. "The key difference is that these events or ceremonies are command-sponsored or com-

mand-hosted and are not of a religious nature, but may include religious elements, such as invocations or benedictions."

The chaplain's complaint of religious discrimination has become a showdown between Navy officials, who said there was never a problem, and Klingenschmitt, who said the Navy has capitulated because of his protest. He said the Navy withheld his extension contract, told him he could not pray "in Jesus' name" while in uniform and punished him for advocating for sailors of other faiths.

"For nine months, they were telling me I'd be kicked out," Klingenschmitt wrote in an 11-page press release he titled, "Exposing deliberate dishonesty by the Navy spokesman." "But as soon as I declared my fast on 20 Dec. 05, I was on national TV the next day, and the day after that, they gave me a brand-new, three-year contract."

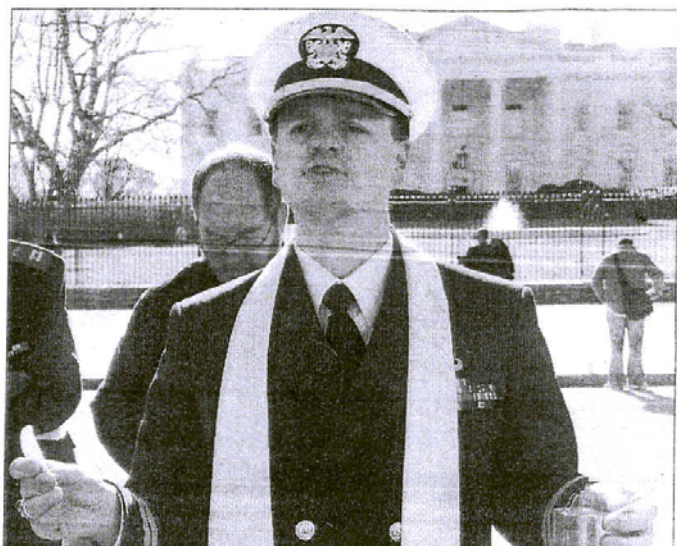
Marks, the spokesman in question, said Klingenschmitt could pray in uniform as long as he didn't express personal beliefs to the media, that Klingenschmitt's contract wasn't withheld and that the Navy's policy asks chaplains to say nonexclusive prayers when addressing sailors of different faiths.

In the Saturday prayer service, Klingenschmitt pushed the limits again.

He told a group of about 20 people in front of the White House that he thanked the Lord the Navy was allowing him to pray in Jesus' name in uniform, and that he had received a letter allowing him to pray in uniform in church services.

Klingenschmitt requested the letter after, he said, he was told he could not appear in uniform on news programs to promote his belief that the Navy is imposing on his right to say evangelical prayers in services meant for sailors of all faiths.

"The order did not direct that



RICK KOZAK, TIMES STAFF

Navy Chaplain (Lt.) Gordon James Klingenschmitt prays "in Jesus' name" in front of the White House wearing his uniform, which may be against military policy.

you 'may not wear [your] uniform in public if [you] talk about religion or if TV cameras may be present,' Crow wrote in a letter dated Jan. 6, citing a letter from Klingenschmitt.

"Media appearances' ... meant interviews, press conferences, press availabilities, and similar events ... where you deliberately engage with the press to express your personal views."

Klingenschmitt said the 11 a.m. gathering Jan. 7, for which he sent out press releases to the media, did not constitute a "press conference." He said in the press release that it was a "bona fide public worship service."

After offering communion, Klingenschmitt took off his Navy uniform jacket in the middle of the sidewalk, exchanged it for a priest's collar and then took questions from the media.

He then gave examples of what he said was religious discrimination against him: He said he was forced to say prayers from the Old Testament rather than the New Testament while on his ship, but that he ended those prayers "in Jesus' name." He also admitted that one of his evangelical sermons, given at the memorial service of a Catholic sailor, received complaints from 25 percent of those who heard it because he said those who do not accept

Jesus will be "cast into hell."

Klingenschmitt said it was not a mandatory service, so he should be allowed to pray in his own faith. He also said he worked with a Jewish soldier to bring kosher MREs onboard the Anzio, but his ship's leadership reprimanded him for not going through his chain of command.

Documents Klingenschmitt provided show that 25 percent of Anzio sailors polled complained about him, saying he "pushes his own brand of religion" and was "more worried about saving souls than counseling problems."

"I never proselytize," Klingenschmitt said in front of the White House on Jan. 7. "I never force my faith on others."

No disciplinary action has been taken against Klingenschmitt, Marks said. The chaplain returned to Norfolk Naval Base, Va., on Jan. 9 and is free to counsel sailors, but he isn't conducting sermons.

"We want to investigate all of his complaints," Marks said. "We want to make sure everything was handled correctly."

Klingenschmitt said there are other reasons he hasn't been reprimanded for speaking publicly against the Navy.

"This is what I expected," he said. "The Navy has been pretty much quiet. They're trying to make me stay quiet." □