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Jury recommends reprimand, fine for Navy chaplain

By KATE WILTROUT, The Virginian-Pilot
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Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt

NORFOLK - The jury that convicted a Navy chaplain of disobeying an order recommended Thursday that he forfeit \$3,000 in pay and receive a written reprimand.

Lt. Gordon J. Klingenschmitt, a chaplain at Norfolk Naval Station, was found guilty Wednesday in a special court-martial of disobeying a superior officer's order. The Evangelical Episcopal priest had been told in writing in December not to wear his uniform for any media appearances without permission.

The federal charge stemmed from Klingenschmitt's appearance at a news conference in front of the White House on March 30. The chaplain, in his uniform, prayed at the beginning and end of the event.

The news conference protested Navy regulations that chaplains offer nonsectarian prayers outside religious services.

Klingenschmitt, 38, faced a maximum penalty of being restricted to base for two months, forfeiting two-thirds of his salary for a year, and receiving a reprimand. Officers cannot be demoted or fired through a special court-martial, but a federal conviction could spark an administrative review that leads to dismissal.

"That letter of reprimand will be used in two or three months at an administrative separation board to kick me out of the Navy," Klingenschmitt said Thursday. He estimated he would lose

\$1.8 million in pension and retirement benefits if he's dismissed.

Klingenschmitt, who was an Air Force major before becoming a chaplain, opted not to settle the charge administratively.

A jury of five officers deliberated for more than two hours on the sentence - longer than it took to find him guilty. While the jury recommended that Klingenschmitt forfeit \$250 in pay every month for a

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year, it also asked that the fine be suspended.

Mary Klingenschmitt, the chaplain's wife, testified during the sentencing phase of the court-martial that she is unable to work because of illness and her husband drives her to weekly medical appointments. Monetary penalties would cause the family "mental and emotional strain," she said.

"We are pleased with the results, and justice is done," said Cmdr. Rex Guinn, the lead prosecutor.

The conviction and sentence are subject to approval by Rear Adm. Frederic Ruehe, commander of the Navy's Mid-Atlantic Region.

William J. Holmes, the chaplain's civilian lawyer, said he would ask the admiral to overturn the conviction and reduce or overturn the sentence.

After his conviction Wednesday, Klingenschmitt vowed to appeal. He contends that the order not to wear his uniform for media appearances is unlawful because Navy regulations allow chaplains to be in uniform for "bona fide religious events or observances."

Because he prayed at the news conference, Klingenschmitt reasons, he was justified in wearing his uniform.

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NOT ALL THE FACTS (hide comment)

I DO NOT have all the facts of this case. However, two things I can say - being a retired sailor and a Christian. 1) If he did disobey an order (lawful one) - he should be punished. However 2), I know of many military members that wear their uniforms to official functions, press conferences, etc. - Chaplains or not. If he was protesting in front of the White House over a military policy - that is not authorized and he should be punished - uniform or not. If he was simply praying, this is obviously religious persecution. I wore my uniform for over 21 years and I prayed in uniform. I never was reprimanded. It was never a big deal. Prayer was accepted - unlike today where secular humanism is the standard. I DO believe our military is transforming into something other than what it clearly was 10 or 20 years ago. Religion is being watered down and will soon be unrecognizable except in battle. Soon, Chapels on bases will be things of the past.
- Michael R. - Virginia Beach

Passion for Self Promotion (hide comment)

Fr. Gordon has something in common with Pat Robertson, Ernest Angle, Jesse Jackson and Rev Al Sharpton- an oversized ego and passion for self promotion. What a hypocrite! Hopefully there is a suitable place in the afterlife for those who betray the church they profess to serve and only seek to call attention to themselves rather than be of service to others.
- Bob Lakeman - Chesapeake

I'm sorry Sir (hide comment)

Hey buddy you know the rules. You enjoyed the action and being famous and now you have to pay the price. Quiet crying like a little girl and step up and be a man. Or better yet pick up an M16 and deploy to Iraq and earn those over inflated "Gentleman" dollars. Take a stand....take the medicine, that's what taking a stand is all about.

- Calvin Mitchell - Norfolk

Typical... (hide comment)

.. that a Navy officer gets away with something and is given a slap on the wrist while the enlisted people always get harsher punishments. He disobeyed an order.. he should have gotten something more severe. It seems the Navy treats its officers like an exclusive club. Talk about elitism!

- Shannon P. - Hampton

A Sad Commentary on Our Present Culture (hide comment)

This case presents another sad commentary on our present culture. During the War of Independence, George Washington requested and put in position chaplains throughout the Continental Army, who proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. In our day and age political correctness run amock, is prohibiting a chaplain from claiming the name of Jesus Christ. The jurors had to pass a verdict within the law, however the regulations have to be changed to allow Mr. Klingenschmitt and others to proclaim the name of Christ the Lord without fear and or retribution. The political correctness prohibiting chaplains from proclaiming the name of Christ the Lord is misplaced and unwarranted.

- Edward R. - Alexandria

Pyrrhic Victory (hide comment)

What a crock!! All this for a letter of reprimand--big deal. How much in taxpayer money did this cost? A dog and pony show that sends the message yet again that a military court martial can convict a ham sandwich for having mustard--a 10 on the so what scale.

- Teri Davis - VA Beach

You dont have the whole story... (hide comment)

This man.... a man of "god" is a liar and an egomaniac. The military would be better off without him in service! He has done much worse than appear in public in uniform (I know for a fact), but since that was a flagrant disregard for orders, what is this man still doing in the military!?!

- Mac E. - Norfolk

Jury recommends reprimand, fine for Navy Chaplain (hide comment)

I applaud him for his stand. The Pilot ran a story today about the difficulty of the Virginia Beach council finding someone to offer generic nondenominational prayer at their meetings, yet the US Navy expects their ministers to do it all the time. One of the first things Moses asked is the name of who was addressing him because it is human nature to want to address whom they are talking to. If one believes in a spiritual world then there are any number of higher powers besides the one true God to address (like angels or demons). The prayer is robbed of any power if it can't be addressed to anyone. Even nonbelieving gentiles in the Bible asked Hebrew prophets to pray to the Hebrew God for them, because they understood the nature of prayer. If I'm getting ready to risk my life I want a real prayer said before I go. Perhaps I misunderstood the definition of "nondenominational prayer" and if so I appologize, but this analysis does still apply to the city council problem.

- Greg H. - Suffolk

Interesting... (hide comment)

This basically shows me that: 1. he is above the law because he is a chaplain 2. he can get away with disregarding a 'direct order'. This is not as if he disobeyed an order 'for the greater good' he disobeyed to do what he wanted, when he wanted, and making a 'larger' point by wearing his uniform, the same uniform of the US Military, which inturn says 'all' that wear the uniform endorse his viewpoints. I think that people were swayed by the religious component, but they rather should know that we, in the military are given rules, guidelines and orders, whether we like them or not, for the good of ourselves, our branch of service, the joint militaries, and of course our country. So, where is the line now? Where is the 'okay, this order is okay to break, this order is not" An order.. is an order.

- *Debbie J. - va beach*

Sorry, Lt. but..... (hide comment)

...you brought it on yourself. Disobey a direct order in the military and this is what it gets you. I admire you for standing up for your belief in God, but the military does not appreciate "their chaplains" not going by the book. I really don't believe a true minister of any faith can make it in the military, what with having no freedom to "preach the word". When you have to read the canned sermons they send you from "on high". (meaning the head chaplain) you pretty much have to give up your personal feelings and convictions. IMHO. Stay the course and keep the faith. Jesus will bless you for it.

- *Eddie A. - Portsmouth*

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