

Navy chaplain's complaint ruled 'without merit'

By Rowan Scarborough
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A Navy review has concluded that a complaint from a ship chaplain was "without merit" when he charged that his commanding officer censored and harassed him by discouraging the use of certain Bible quotations.

But Navy Lt. Gordon J. Klingenschmitt said the investigative report actually backs up his complaint, even though the chief investigator sided with the commander.

The Navy's final decision came in a June 7 memo to the officer from Anita K. Blair, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for military personnel policy. Mrs. Blair said she concurred with the findings of Rear Adm. Frederic R. Ruehe, commander of the Navy's Mid-Atlantic region, who found Lt. Klingenschmitt's claims to be "without merit."

Lt. Klingenschmitt has waged a national campaign to fight what he says are military restrictions on what chaplains preach. He also has turned to Congress, which is debating legislation to ensure religious freedom for chaplains.

Much of Lt. Klingenschmitt's complaint stems from a memorial sermon he delivered in 2004 onboard the cruiser USS Anzio for a deceased petty officer. [CHAPLAIN KLINGENSCHMITT ADDS: Actually this optionally-attended "Christian memorial service" was held *in the base chapel* to honor the faith of the deceased, unlike the two secular memorial ceremonies held for him onboard the ship.] The ship's captain and some crew did not think it was inclusive; Lt. Klingenschmitt said he was abiding by his faith when he preached the Gospels, including John's admonition that eternal life goes only to those who believe in the son of God.

"It's well-documented he punished me in writing three times for my sermon," Lt. Klingenschmitt said. "... They want to take a black Magic Marker to my Bible and tell me I can't read that Scripture in the chapel."

The chaplain said his commanding officer, Capt. James Carr, retaliated against him by downgrading his January 2005 fitness report. But Adm. Ruehe concluded that the report "was not the result of improper discrimination on the basis of his religious beliefs or the practice of his faith, but rather Captain Carr's legitimate evaluation of his performance of duty."

Concerning the sermon, the Ruehe report says, "Prior to the event, Captain Carr did not review Lieutenant Klingenschmitt's sermon, nor censor it in any way. Neither did he interfere with Lieutenant Klingenschmitt's delivery of his sermon or his conduct of the memorial service." Capt. Carr received about two dozen complaints from sailors and family members about the sermon, according to the report.

[CHAPLAIN KLINGENSCHMITT ADDS: He overlooked the fact 84% of the crew agreed on the survey "The Command Chaplain cares for all denominations, regardless of faith or belief."]

Lt. Klingenschmitt, a member of a small breakaway evangelical Episcopal denomination, responded that his bishop required him to preach all the Gospels. But Adm. Ruehe said the chaplain presented no document requiring him to preach all the Gospels at that particular memorial service.

Lt. Klingenschmitt said in a written notation to this report section that Adm. Ruehe "rewards Captain Carr for punishing the chaplain for quoting the Bible."

"This proves that senior naval officials have been lying to Congress and the American people the last six months," Lt. Klingenschmitt said. "They claim we can practice our faith inside the chapel during voluntary worship, when the top Navy judge [Mrs. Blair] has just ruled that we can't."

The Navy views the issue differently. It says commanders can influence what chaplains say at public events, such as the memorial event, as opposed to a divine worship service.

"Contrary to Lt. Klingenschmitt's assertion, the memorial service he was talking about was not worship, but a nondenomination event open to attendance by any person of many different beliefs," said Lt. j.g. Karl Lettow, a Navy spokesman at the Pentagon. "They were there to remember their deceased shipmate and loved one."

On the other hand, he said, "We allow and encourage our chaplains to pray according to their individual faiths in voluntary divine worship services."

Lt. Klingenschmitt also said the report confirms that Capt. Carr censored his evening prayers. The report states: "Capt. Carr legitimately sought to ensure evening prayer had the broadest possible appeal."

That July and November, Capt. Carr conducted a religious survey to judge the effects of the chaplain's sermons. Lt. Klingenschmitt said the surveys "theologically harassed" him.

Overall, Adm. Ruehe concluded, "There is no evidence Captain Carr took any adverse action against Lieutenant Klingenschmitt based on the content of his regular Protestant worship service."

Lt. Klingenschmitt, 38, faces court-martial on a charge that he disobeyed a direct order by appearing at a protest outside the White House in his Navy uniform, after being told to first get prior approval.

[CHAPLAIN KLINGENSCHMITT ADDS: And don't forget, they gave me prior written permission to wear my uniform, so long as I only said prayers, which I obeyed...read para 4 page 4 here: <http://persuade.tv/frenzy/PR10surrender.pdf>]