

Chaplain says he was forced off Navy ship

Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt says he was disciplined because of complaints about the fervency of his Christian faith.

[BY WARD SANDERSON](#)

247-4991

May 1 2005

VIRGINIA BEACH -- A Navy chaplain here claims he was forced off the missile cruiser Anzio because he insisted on kosher meals for an Orthodox Jewish sailor and because of the fervency of his own Christian beliefs.



Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt fears he'll eventually be forced from active duty. The 36-year-old priest with the Evangelical Episcopal Church was set to finish his first tour as a chaplain after spending most of his 14 years of service as an Air Force weapons officer. Klingenschmitt said he volunteered for demotion so he could switch services to become a chaplain.

The claims echo those of three current lawsuits filed against the Navy by evangelicals, one of them a large class-action case. A fourth suit recently ended in the service's favor.

Klingenschmitt said he hadn't given much thought to claims that dogmatic chaplains have a tough time, but now he's a believer.

"Sailors go overseas to provide religious liberty to others," Klingenschmitt said, "and our Navy deprives them of that same religious liberty at home."

The Navy is looking into Klingenschmitt's claims but will not discuss specifics.

"Right now, the Navy doesn't have a reaction," said Lt. Cmdr. Charles Owens, spokesman for the Navy's Atlantic surface force in Norfolk. He said he consulted with senior chaplains and the Anzio's commander, Capt. James Carr, and all decided to keep quiet for now.

"Right now, he (Klingenschmitt) has made some allegations, and what the Navy's doing, they're having an inquiry into these allegations," Owens said. "But right now, it's 'Lets look and see if there's anything to it.' "

CONFLICT FROM ABOVE

Klingenschmitt said his seas came to a boil in November when the Anzio ran out of prepackaged kosher meals for Petty Officer 3rd Class Brian Negrette. The ship was halfway through a six-week European tour. The sailor then ate only peanut butter and jelly and hand-washed fruit, the chaplain said, and lost 17 pounds.

"Our galley is not kosher," Klingenschmitt said. "There's no way to make it kosher."

The chaplain said Capt. Carr then accused Negrette of lying about losing weight.

The sailor had previously undergone a "sincerity test" with a more liberal rabbi chaplain to see whether he really needed the kosher meals at all, Klingenschmitt said. The sailor endured a second sincerity test after he asked to leave the Navy in good graces. That request was denied.

"He came to me in tears after his sincerity interview with the senior rabbi chaplain," Klingenschmitt said. "I'd say he was severely traumatized."

Negrette helped the chaplain prepare a written account of his complaints but will not publicly comment.

Klingenschmitt said the captain rebuked him for "causing a stir" by ordering the kosher meals in the first place.

According to the narrative the chaplain and Negrette prepared, a chief petty officer from another vessel also yelled at Negrette for wearing a yarmulke, though naval regulations allow it. It also says Negrette began paying fellow sailors \$100 to take his Saturday shift because that is the Jewish Sabbath.

The kosher conundrum wasn't Klingenschmitt's first clash with command: He said the captain and senior chaplains were also upset that he did not endorse mandatory attendance of sailors at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City as part of Fleet Week celebrations there last May. The church broadcasts its services over the Hallmark Channel, and Klingenschmitt accuses the Navy of forcing about 100 sailors to attend so they'd be seen on television.

Klingenschmitt said he couldn't endorse the event because the church does not oppose homosexuality and because the Navy doesn't have the power to force sailors to attend any church.

"It was a publicity stunt," Klingenschmitt said. "They wanted the Navy to look good."

DIFFERING VIEWS

He said his captain and several of Anzio's crew also became upset because Klingenschmitt preached about heaven and hell at a funeral service for a sailor who died in a motorcycle accident.

Klingenschmitt said the sermon, based on the eighth chapter of the book of Romans, was a favorite of the deceased sailor and was the reason that sailor became a Christian. He said the captain also asked that

evening prayers refer only to the Old Testament, since any mention of Jesus Christ could offend those of other faiths.

In ship surveys conducted on order of the captain, the results of which were provided by Klingenschmitt, about a quarter of more than 200 sailors polled wrote negative comments about the chaplain, mostly citing his zeal or disagreements with his beliefs.

"He definitely pushes his own brand of religion," one sailor wrote.

"More worried about saving people's souls than counseling problem," wrote another.

But 84 percent of the crew also believed the chaplain accommodated other faiths, Klingenschmitt maintains. The chaplain claims the captain misrepresented survey figures to the Navy.

Klingenschmitt counters criticism by citing a section of U.S. Code: "An officer in the Chaplain Corps may conduct public worship according to the manner and forms of the church of which he is a member."

He said his Sunday services and Bible studies were optional and he had no choice but to preach what his denomination demands.

The chaplain said he offered to turn over the evening prayers to crew members of other faiths on a rotating basis, but the request was denied. He said he also had Wiccan, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox sailors talk about their faiths to his Protestant Bible study class.

REFLECTIONS

Though he hasn't been forced out of the Navy, Klingenschmitt said he believes his career is over. He points to a letter written by the captain that rated the officer's willingness to serve again with Klingenschmitt as 5 out of 5 - the worst possible score.

"I'll be out on the street looking for a job," he said.

The Navy, however, reacted by saying that Klingenschmitt never received a negative formal evaluation.

One former Anzio sailor said Klingenschmitt had a reputation both for going to bat for sailors and for religious zeal.

"I've seen him politically hurt himself by reaching out to me and politically hurt himself by reaching out to others," said 24-year-old Jered Hodges, who received a medical discharge from the Navy in March due to depression.

"The most I've heard a sailor say about him is, 'That chaplain is very religious.' But I don't think a chaplain would find that demeaning at all."

Hodges had seen Klingenschmitt for counseling but was told by a lieutenant to avoid the chaplain.

"That I thought was strange," Hodges said. "I was personally reprimanded for volunteering for any program that the chaplain had."

Hodges said Klingenschmitt was the only person who would listen to him.

"He tried very hard to help me with my problem," he said. "He was attacked for helping me."

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