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Sat, January 28, 2006

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Prayer restrictions controversial  
Chaplain's religious rights at ceremonies cause dispute  
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By Alison Walker  
News-Post Staff

FREDERICK -- About three weeks after a Navy chaplain went on a hunger strike to protest what he believes are restrictions on chaplains' right to publicly pray using Jesus' name, the fast ended, but the debate did not.

Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, a Norfolk, Va., Navy chaplain whose hunger strike outside the White House ended Jan. 7, brought the issue to national attention.

Lt. Klingenschmitt's commanding officer, Capt. James Carr, had sent Lt. Klingenschmitt a letter stating he could not wear his uniform for media appearances, according to Navy uniform regulations.

A Navy spokesman said chaplains may pray according to their faith during voluntary worship services, but in secular situations, which include command-hosted ceremonies, they should be inclusive of all faiths.

In Frederick, Fort Detrick's base chaplain, Lt. Col. Warren Kirby Jr., said Fort Detrick not only permits him to, but requests that he say a prayer at command-hosted events that soldiers

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are required to attend. During the next 10 days, Col. Kirby said, he will be saying a prayer at a retirement ceremony and three promotion ceremonies.

"There are some people in the Army who prefer for that not to happen, people in high command," Col. Kirby said. "But tradition, protocol and regulation allows for it."

Col. Kirby supports chaplains' rights to offer a religious prayer at all base ceremonies and would support President Bush signing an executive order to protect those rights, he said.

"There are misconceptions regarding interpretations of the Constitution," he said. "We have freedom of religion, not freedom from religion."

General Navy policy states that sailors may not wear their uniform when supporting personal or partisan views. According to the Navy, federal law, part of U.S. Code Title X, restricts military chaplains' freedom to pray "according to their own manners and form" at only voluntary religious events, such as Sunday services sailors choose to attend.

Lt. Klingenschmitt resumed eating when his naval base's commanding officer said he could wear his uni

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form if he was conducting a worship service in front of the White House.

At Fort Detrick's Retiree Council meeting earlier this month, member Robert Glausier, 74, expressed concern about restrictions on military chaplains' right to use religious prayers in secular services at Fort Detrick and at other military bases.

"My personal opinion is that the chaplain was being hampered in performing his duties," said Mr. Glausier, a Boonsboro resident who is retired from the U.S. Marine Corps. "It's the way they were trained in their seminaries, the way they've always done it since there was a chaplain corps."

Mr. Glausier said he learned of the issue through the American Center for Law & Justice. The center sent President Bush a petition with more than 200,000 names urging the him to issue an executive order allowing chaplains to pray according to their faith.

"It is unacceptable that there is pressure inside the military to censor chaplains and prevent them to pray according to their faith," ACLJ Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow said in a news release on the organization's Web site.

But Jeremy Gunn, director of ACLU's program on freedom and religious belief, said chaplains' freedom to pray according to their religion in a church setting or mass is not being questioned.

"It's clear that both the chaplain and people in the military have the right of freedom of their religion, and that should be guaranteed by the Constitution," he said. "It's a very different issue when it's a quasi-public ceremony. That's where the law is murky, where behavior is murky."

Col. Kirby said he and many Army chaplains use sensitivity in closing their prayers at secular ceremonies, ending prayers with "in the Lord's name," rather

than the Christian-oriented "Jesus' name."

He said he encourages soldiers in attendance to close the prayer in their mind with the name of the higher power they believe in.

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