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## Chaplain's Protest Puts Spotlight on Prayer and the Military

*By Sara Horn, AGreaterFreedom.com*

WASHINGTON, D.C. - A junior Navy chaplain ended an 18-day hunger strike on Saturday and declared "a victory for religious liberty" after accepting religious accommodations from what he called his "reluctant superior officers."

"They're finally giving me back my uniform, and letting me pray publicly in Jesus' name," said Lt. Chaplain Gordon Klingenschmitt, who served in the Air Force for 11 years as an officer before becoming a priest in the Evangelical Episcopal Church. He then transferred to the Navy to become a chaplain in 2002.

Ch. Klingenschmitt began his fast four days before Christmas, hoping to persuade President Bush to sign an executive order allowing military chaplains to pray according to their individual religious traditions. That order failed to materialize despite a petition by The American Center for Law and Justice that featured 173,000 signatures requesting the order along with 73 members of Congress, led by Congressman Walter Jones (NC), who sent their own letter to the president.

Klingenschmitt's battle with the Navy began in early 2005 after a series of conflicts took place with his superior officers the previous year during his assignment on the cruiser USS Anzio, stationed in Norfolk, Va. Klingenschmitt says he was punished for theological disagreements with his superiors that included his objections to requiring sailors to participate in services during Fleet Week at a church that condones homosexuality; his advocacy for a Jewish sailor who wanted kosher meals, and sermons he preached that some viewed as intolerant and unacceptable within the role of a chaplain.

According to the Associated Press, Capt. Jim Carr, the commander of the Anzio and Klingenschmitt's superior, recommended in March of 2005 that the Navy Personnel Command not extend the chaplain's tour of active duty.

"He has demonstrated recurring confusion concerning a chaplain's role within a military organization," Carr wrote to the command.

The chaplain fought the recommendation for dismissal and claimed that the Navy prohibits a Christian chaplain from publicly praying in the name of Jesus. He quickly began his one-man publicity campaign to force the Navy to change its policy and save his career at the same time, garnering support from the civilian Christian population but very little from his fellow chaplains.

### Can They or Can't They?

Since scandal broke out at the U.S. Air Force Academy last year where former cadets accused the institution of religious bias, the issue of prayer and religious faith, specifically Christian faith, in the military continues to make headlines. But many chaplains from the various branches contend that they have not had the problems that Chaplain Klingenschmitt has had, specifically with praying in the name of Jesus.

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### Verse of the Week

"For you are called to freedom, brothers; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love" (Gal. 5:13, HCSB).

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Chaplain Lt. Cmdr. Alan Wilmot is a Navy chaplain endorsed by the American Baptist denomination and is currently stationed at Coast Guard Air Station Cape Cod. After seeing a news story on the online publication World Net Daily that outlined Chaplain Klingenschmitt's complaints, he was compelled to write to the publication to caution them in their coverage.

"I read your article... with great interest, but I have to say I don't know what he's talking about," wrote Wilmot. "It really caused me to wonder if we're in the same Navy!"

Wilmot told WND that he has prayed in the name of Jesus "consistently" since joining the Navy 15 years ago. The only time he does not use that specific phrase is in formal situations when he is praying in a setting where "there is no choice for those in the audience to be there." As a matter of courtesy, said Wilmot, he ends such prayers with "in Your most holy name we pray" or something similar.

One Army chaplain, who spoke on background, said he has never had difficulty in praying in the name of Jesus but he is careful in public settings in the wording he chooses, particularly when it is an official military ceremony and not an optional chapel service. He said that offering a disclaimer such as "I invite you to pray according to your faith as I pray in mine" is usually enough.

Chaplain Col. Paul Vicalvi is the Commandant of the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School at Ft. Jackson, S.C. He said that candidates for the Army chaplaincy are asked about their willingness and ability to work in a pluralistic environment early on in their interviews and application process.

"Once they're here [at the school], they're taught by chaplains from different faith groups and they're taught that they'll be working with soldiers and family members from different faith groups and backgrounds," said Vicalvi. "They are not told how they can pray and not pray."

Vicalvi admits that there is a fine line between working in a pluralistic setting and staying true to a chaplain's own faith. "It is a tension and I am an evangelical chaplain myself. But I have never been stifled or censored or been told what to say...or how to pray.... My belief as an evangelical is that you draw people to Christ, instead of forcing them. My sensitivity to them I think has more of a positive influence than not."

Since the American Revolution, chaplains have been part of the military along with the recognition of religious faith and a dependence on God. Even in formal military ceremonies, at least one prayer is typically offered.

"I think commanders, through the years, have wanted to make sure God was recognized as part of their command so they would want a prayer to be there," said Vicalvi. "Sometimes it may just be a tradition but the majority of commanders realize they need more than what they have themselves and they need a divine power in their command that's 'bigger than me.' The commanders want [chaplains] there."

#### Call for the Executive Order Continues

Chaplain Klingenschmitt's web site, [persuade.tv](http://persuade.tv), asserts that his hunger strike was a victory, despite his inability to extract an executive order from the president as he hoped. He intends to continue the fight so "every chaplain has the same rights I have today. I don't want special favors just because I've been seen on television."

The White House's most recent comment on the issue came from press secretary Scott McClellan during a press briefing Jan. 5 when a reporter asked whether President Bush would issue the order.

"The President believes strongly in the free exercise of religion and he believes that it's important that our military personnel be able to freely express themselves to religion," said McClellan. "We value the contributions of our military chaplains to our men and women in uniform and we're committed to safeguarding the ability of people to freely express their religious views."

Meanwhile, Rep. Walter Jones has renewed the call for President Bush to "protect the constitutional right of military chaplains to pray according to their

faith.”

Something, according to most chaplains, they already do.

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**About Sara Horn**

**Sara Horn is the publisher and editor of AGreaterFreedom.com. She is the author of *A Greater Freedom: Stories of Faith From Operation Iraqi Freedom* with executive editor Oliver North. Check out her daily blog, [Faith at the Front](#).**

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