

# **NAVY CHAPLAIN AT CENTER OF PRAYER CONTROVERSY TO BE COURT-MARTIALED**

**By William H. McMichael**

*Times Staff Writer*

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NORFOLK NAVAL STATION, Va. – An evangelical Navy chaplain who attended a press conference and offered a prayer “in Jesus’ name” at the event while in uniform will be court-martialed for disobeying his commanding officer’s order not to do so.

Chaplain (Lt.) Gordon J. Klingenschmitt, who on May 3 rejected an administrative hearing on two charges, now faces a single charge of disobeying a lawful order from a commissioned officer, according to Lt. Cmdr. Bob Mehal of Navy Region Mid-Atlantic. “I am innocent,” Klingenschmitt said May 19. “And I will prove my innocence at court-martial.”

Klingenschmitt, an evangelical Episcopal priest assigned to the chaplain’s office at Norfolk Naval Station, has protested what he says is his right to lead evangelical Episcopal prayers, rather than nonsectarian prayers, when speaking to sailors of all faiths. The Navy has said he has the right to pray in his own faith but that chaplains have been asked since 1988 to make their prayers inclusive.

His initial protest, launched Dec. 20, became a 19-day hunger strike. He broke that fast Jan. 7 and held a public worship service while in uniform in front of the White House after receiving what he says was written permission to do so.

After the Navy issued a new policy in February stating that the religious expressions of chaplains outside worship services “should be non-sectarian in nature,” Klingenschmitt subsequently attended a March 30 press conference protesting that policy. At the event, held in front of the White House by former Chief Justice of Alabama Roy Moore, Klingenschmitt offered a “ceremonial” prayer.

Klingenschmitt had been ordered not to take part. The Navy subsequently charged him with “attending and participating” in that news conference, disobeying the order. “The event was a press conference,” Klingenschmitt said. “My religious observance was a part of that. I prayed in Jesus’ name. I

had written authorization to pray while in uniform.” (In response to the Navy’s Feb. 21 directive, Republicans in the House on May 11 added to a military spending bill language that would permit chaplains to “have the prerogative to pray according to the dictates of the chaplain’s own conscience.”)

Klingenschmitt’s case, referred to trial May 18, will be heard by a special court-martial, an intermediate-level court-martial heard by a military judge and a minimum of three officers seated as a panel or jury. “I think that’s appropriate,” Mehal said. “It gives this an opportunity to be heard in front of a neutral third party.”

A date for the trial has not yet been set. Under military law, Klingenschmitt can waive the panel and have his case heard by a military judge alone. He said he doesn’t yet know what he’ll choose. If found guilty, Klingenschmitt’s punishment would be administrative in nature. An officer convicted at a special court-martial cannot be dismissed from the service or confined, according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

William H. McMichael is the Hampton Roads bureau chief for Navy Times.