Thursday, February 11, 2016

Patrick J. Murphy  
Acting Secretary of the Army  
101 Army Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20310-0101

Dear Mr. Acting Secretary Murphy:

I am writing to express the Military Religious Freedom Foundation’s great concern that Army Chaplains are attending assault training and even carrying weapons.

The Army recently posted an online article entitled “Special Forces Tab, Green Beret, SFQC – A Vehicle For Chaplains” (see addendum, pages 3-5). The article tells the stories of three Army Chaplains – Chaplain (Capt.) Mike Smith, Chaplain (Maj.) Timothy Maracle, and Chaplain (Maj.) Peter Hofman – who have completed the Special Forces Qualification Force (“SFQC”). While the article highlighted the sense of camaraderie with Special Forces soldiers these Chaplains claim such training fostered, it neglected to mention that these Chaplains are violating Army Regulations.

Army Regulation 165-1 states:

3-1f. Noncombatant. Chaplains will not bear arms in combat or in unit combat skills training. Chaplains function as protected personnel under the Geneva Convention and are noncombatants as a matter of Army policy (see FM 27-10). Chaplain activities in religious support operations will not compromise the noncombatant status. (emphasis added)

As you know, violation of an Army Regulation is punishable under the provisions of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. While only Chaplain (Maj.) Hofman admitted to carrying a weapon, it can safely be presumed that all three of these Chaplains used weapons while participating in the SFQC. Consequently, the Army should punish this clear violation, rather than praising it as a “vehicle for Chaplains.”

This regulation is necessary for the protection of Chaplains, as well as all others granted noncombatant status, such as medical personnel. It is designed to allow, even in war, for the spiritual care of combatants and POWs. If a handful of Chaplains violate this very clear regulation, the enemy has no reason to honor the protected status of any noncombatant.
While these Chaplains apparently believe that going through SFQC and carrying weapons helps them connect with the Special Forces soldiers they will counsel, MRFF submits it will actually have the opposite effect. In the article, Chaplain (Maj.) Hofman directly compared his mission with Special Forces with the mission of Jesus. As if that weren’t enough of a problem, he did so while carrying a weapon. The chilling effect such conviction while armed will have on the willingness of soldiers to seek counsel from him can only be monumental.

Regardless of any benefits these Chaplains believe are received from completing SFQC and carrying weapons, the nature of the military is to obey orders even if doing so causes great risk to that soldier’s own life. We demand that the Army Regulations be obeyed and that these Chaplains be disciplined for their violations as required by the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Respectfully,

Michael L. “Mikey” Weinstein, Esq.
Founder and President
Military Religious Freedom Foundation

CC:
Hon. Ruth S. Vetter, Esq. – Director, Standards of Conduct Office, Department of Defense General Counsel
Gen. Mark A. Milley, U.S. Army Chief of Staff
CH (MG) Paul K. Hurley, Chief of Chaplains of the United States Army
ADDENDUM 1

http://www.army.mil/article/161945/Special_Forces_Tab__Green_Beret__SFQC____A_vehicle_for_Chaplains/

Special Forces Tab, Green Beret, SFQC -- A vehicle for Chaplains

February 5, 2016

By Sgt. Kyle Fisch, USASOC Public Affairs
FORT BRAGG, N.C. -- A Roman poet named Juvenal is credited with saying; "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" --a Latin phrase accepted to mean "who will guard the guardians?" Chaplains are often seen as these guardians, someone who looks after those who protect others.

Historically, nearly every unit in the Army has had Chaplains assigned to look after the spiritual and/or emotional needs of the force, to include elite units such as U.S. Army Airborne, Rangers, and Special Forces. While many Chaplains assigned to these units decide to go through the Basic Airborne Course and Ranger School, which can help them better relate to the Soldiers in their care, few have had the opportunity to attend and complete the U.S. Army Special Forces Qualification Course.

"Support Soldiers such as the Staff Judge Advocate, Surgeons Office and Chaplains, are a necessity to Special Forces, but they are not required and/or rarely offered the opportunity to attend SFQC, without having to re-class (change their MOS)," said Chaplain (Capt.) Mike Smith, now a Special Forces qualified Chaplain with 3rd General Support Aviation Battalion, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division. "Now, since I completed the course and earned the coveted Green Beret, they see me as one of them. I have 'survived' the same challenges they had to survive in order to serve in the Special Forces community."

"To me, it isn't the fact that I am able to wear the beret as much as it allows me to understand the operators I serve. There is a sense of alienation when a support Soldier, including the Chaplain, arrives to an SF unit. There is some assessment time where the unit attempts to understand the new Chaplain," said Chaplain (Maj.) Timothy Maracle, a Special Forces qualified Chaplain with 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne). "This period of acceptance and access to the unit allows a Chaplain the ability to express their identity to the new group of Soldiers and operators. On the other side, when the unit finally does accept the Chaplain, there is an unbreakable bond. We support one another as if they were our own flesh and blood. The beret is the vehicle of access, but it doesn't do everything for a Chaplain, just provides access."

Smith recalls some of the challenges he faced through his journey, explaining that a mere week from graduation he was told he may be receiving a certificate of completion rather than actually donning the Green Beret with the rest of his classmates. However, senior SF personnel such as Chaplain (Col.) Keith Croom expressed those Chaplains who have met the same standards of SFQC as other candidates should be granted the opportunity to don the Green Beret and thus minister with their SF brethren.

Although these Chaplains have met the same standards, been through the same training, and hold the same qualifications as many SF Soldiers, they do not consider themselves 'operators.'

"If there is one thing I learned, it is that I am not an 'operator.' I was not and am not called to that role. It's not to say that I couldn't take on that role, because I have gone through the training, but it's more to say that my role is different," said Chaplain (Maj.) Peter Hofman, a SF Qualified Chaplain and instructor at the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School, Fort Jackson, South Carolina. "My role is to guard the guardians, to minister to those in the SF community."

Hofman also recalls a moment during his time at SFQC when he was met with his share of adversity.
After his final patrol in the Small Unit Tactics portion of the course, Hofman notes that he was sitting with the rest of his platoon waiting for a final AAR (after action review), when an instructor walked up to him and said, "What's your deal man?", which led him to believe he had done something wrong. The instructor then clarified his initial question by asking why Hofman, as a chaplain, was learning about assaulting objectives and carrying weapons.

"I could tell he was irritated by my presence and after a little back and forth I finally said, 'Well sergeant, I think the SF motto: 'De Oppresso Liber' is an important mission," he said. "In fact, it is the same mission that Jesus stated was his mission in 'Luke 4' quoting from 'Isaiah, chapter 61'. It's a mission that I would like to be a part of and the SF community is a brotherhood that I would be honored to serve in'. Apparently, that satisfied him because he walked away. In that moment I became more aware than ever before what a huge responsibility I was being charged with and what a privilege it was to be there and serve with these 'guardians.'"

Because of the unique situation these Chaplains find themselves in (attending SFAS and SFQC as Chaplains), they also share a unique perspective.

"The essence of what SFQC has done for me is knowledge. Knowledge about how much these Soldiers have been pushed, pulled, and stressed while going through the course. Knowledge about the way operators think, which assisted me during counselings with their spouse. Knowledge about how important perception is to an operator, as it is the first impression of a person that will assist an operator when he needs it," said Maracle. "Knowledge about my own weaknesses and how understanding my breaking points, I can understand that in others as well. And finally, knowledge about the bigger picture of what is truly important to an operator and how to support them when they don't even know they need it."

According to Maracle, for him and his fellow Chaplains, enduring and ultimately graduating this grueling course was never about the glory, but always about the Soldiers they would later serve.

"Any time a chaplain can successfully complete challenging courses and become tabbed, I believe it bolsters the reputation of the (Chaplains) Corps," said Crawley "I am a better man and Chaplain for having gone through, and I believe it also gives us a voice in places we may not have without it."