

The New Pariahs: Atheists in the U.S. Military

Michael Dorian

In 2007, United States Army Specialist Jeremy Hall decided to hold a meeting of atheists and agnostics at his base camp in Tikrit, Iraq. Hall, a military police soldier in Iraq at the time, was about to have his life changed in ways he could never have imagined.

Three other people showed up for Hall's meeting, one of them Army Major Freddy Welborn. Hall says Welborn declared himself "a freethinker" as his entrée into the group. But fifteen minutes into the meeting, Hall realized something was *very* wrong. Major Welborn was no kindred nonbeliever. According to Hall, Welborn began chastising him for his atheism and threatening him with disciplinary action.

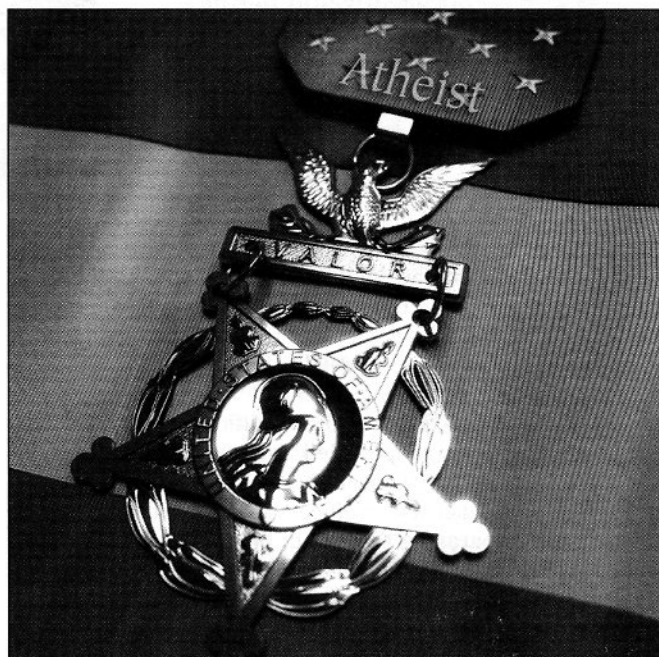
According to his MySpace page and his e-mails, Welborn is a self-described "warrior of Christ" and an openly zealous Christian who attended the meeting apparently in order to confront the unseemly godless among his ranks. Declining an interview for this article, Welborn replied by e-mail that "the truth is more important than anything and I truly believe that God wants me to tell it. I'm following His will and don't think the time is now [to tell my side of the story]."

After the meeting, Hall allegedly received death threats, was physically harassed, and was virtually ostracized by his fellow American soldiers. After three months, he was sent to a base in Kansas, because otherwise it seemed he would end up as another casualty of war.

One of the most alarming threats to Hall's personal safety occurred while Hall was on leave in Qatar during the summer of 2007. "Six or eight big guys [American soldiers] started following me around, calling me an 'atheist ass pirate,' saying 'we're going to beat your ass.' They wanted to hurt me," reports Hall. He also feared being "fragg'd"—having a fragmentation grenade tossed into his tent while sleeping, a tactic suspected in instances of not-so-friendly fire. "I couldn't sleep. I didn't want to go out like that," states the laconic Hall.

Hall and the Military Religious Freedom Foundation—a watchdog organization headed by retired Air Force attorney Mikey Weinstein—filed a lawsuit in the Kansas federal courthouse, naming as defendants not only Major Welborn but also

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Specialist Jeremy Hall tried to start a meeting of atheist and agnostic soldiers. Three months later he was sent home because he wasn't safe in Iraq.

United States Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. The case charges that Hall's rights of free speech and assembly were violated and that he was subjected to an impermissible religious test, another constitutional breach. Additionally, the lawsuit claims that Hall was denied a promotion due to his atheism because he might be "unable to put aside his personal convictions and pray with his troops," and he would have trouble bonding with them if promoted to a leadership position.

Hall's plight, although more arduous than most, is not altogether unusual. "The only religion I've seen overtly supported is the Christian religion," claims Master Sergeant Kathleen Johnson, who has been in the U.S. Army for twenty-three

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years. She founded the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers (MAAF). "But as more and more people refuse to pretend to be something they're not, there are going to be more and more incidents. A good example is Jeremy Hall; he stood up for his rights."

Another soldier who has endured difficulties for his nonbelief is Wayne Adkins, a decorated National Guard officer who served in Iraq. He says that he "began noticing a trend: mostly chaplains but also senior officers making comments in the news media disparaging atheists in the military." Adkins was finally prompted to take action by remarks that Lt. General H. Steven Blum delivered before a meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 2006. Blum declared that "agnostics, atheists, and bigots" are not as well suited to life on the frontlines because "something that they lived their whole life [sic] believing gets thrown out the door" when they are faced with mortality. Then-First Lieutenant Adkins filed a formal complaint with the National Guard Bureau's Equal Opportunity Office against Blum, a three-star general.

Adkins says that the complaint was essentially ignored, presumably in the hope that as months passed the whole incident would just be forgotten. "They sat on it," claims Adkins, a thoughtful former pastoral theology student. "Every time I called to follow up, they acted like they were hearing about it for the first time. Ultimately, I was told they weren't going to do anything about it." Adkins asserts that a disregard for atheists, and even discrimination against them, is a systemic problem in the military.

According to an article in *The Catholic Herald*, Chaplain and Major Eric Albertson, a Catholic priest in the military archdiocese, says: "Commanders recognize that spiritually fit soldiers are better fighters, and can bring a spirit of determination to the mission that is courageous and heroic."

"Religious indoctrination is part of military culture, specifically Christian religious indoctrination, at least in my experience," attests Master Sergeant Johnson.

With the likes of Hall, Weinstein, Johnson, and Adkins come the first real rumblings of change to the old order. Weinstein's Military Religious Freedom Foundation claims to have received more than 5,500 complaints from retired and current U.S. soldiers fed up with the blatantly religious tenor of the armed services.

When asked why he thinks atheists are so reviled in the military, Adkins credits "a lot of left-over Cold-War sentiment that atheism equals Communism." Adkins ultimately resigned his commission as a matter of principle, saying, "I don't want to be part of the military of a nation that's moving toward being a theocracy and thinks it's in a holy war with Islam."

Hall corroborates this sentiment among the troops. "When some soldiers go to Iraq, a Muslim country, they think they're doing God's work. I've heard that said. People have actually expressed the view that this war is justified because we're going to spread God's love." This declared notion, perhaps better than anything else, elucidates the inherent dangers of believing one enjoys a proprietary relationship with a deity.

Hall contends that "if you're not a Christian, you're second rate, you're not in the club." Does he think that he still gets unfair treatment? "Yes, I get unfair treatment," says Hall, but due to the pending lawsuit, "I can't discuss it at the moment." On being stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, Hall quietly admits, "I feel tolerated. I'm not seen as a soldier. I'm just that guy who did that thing."

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After three-and-a-half years in the Army, Specialist Hall will not be re-enlisting. His pending federal lawsuit against Defense Secretary Gates and Major Welborn will keep him as close to the military as he now cares to be.

Altering the attitudes of soldiers who want to hurt Hall or who see him as an unwanted outsider is a problem with much deeper roots in society than even the hugely powerful U.S. armed forces can transcend. The more practical issue is whether the military will make substantive modifications to its apparent disdain for the nonbelievers among its ranks.

Change within this system won't come easily or quickly. Segregation in the military ended officially in 1954 with the abolition of the final all-African-American unit. Both women and homosexuals have had a notoriously hard time within the armed forces as well. Now it looks like it's the heathens' turn to confront a system that is likely incapable of implementing a policy in this instance of "Don't ask, don't tell." ■■