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## Soldier Sues Army, Saying His Atheism Led to Threats

By NEELA BANERJEE  
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FORT RILEY, Kan. — When Specialist Jeremy Hall held a meeting last July for atheists and freethinkers at Camp Speicher in Iraq, he was excited, he said, to see an officer attending.

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Ed Zurga for The New York Times  
Specialist Jeremy Hall, 23, outside Fort Riley, Kan., where he has been stationed since being sent home early from Iraq because of threats from fellow soldiers.

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Kevin Moloney for The New York Times  
Mikey Weinstein, founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, talking to cadets at the Air Force Academy.

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Kevin Moloney for The New York Times  
At center, the chapel at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. In 2005, new rules went into effect after cadets complained that evangelical Christian officers proselytized on campus.

But minutes into the talk, the officer, Maj. Freddy J. Welborn, began to berate Specialist Hall and another soldier about atheism, Specialist Hall wrote in a sworn statement. “People like you are not holding up the Constitution and are going against what the founding fathers, who were Christians, wanted for America!” Major Welborn said, according to the statement.

Major Welborn told the soldiers he might bar them from re-enlistment and bring charges against them, according to the statement.

Last month, Specialist Hall and the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, an advocacy group, filed suit in federal court in Kansas, alleging that Specialist Hall’s right to be free from state endorsement of religion under the First Amendment had been violated and that he had faced retaliation for his views. In November, he was sent home early from Iraq because of threats from fellow soldiers.

Eileen Lainez, a spokeswoman for the Defense Department, declined to comment on the case, saying, “The department does not discuss pending litigation.”

Specialist Hall’s lawsuit is the latest incident to raise questions about the military’s religion guidelines. In 2005, the Air Force issued new regulations in response to complaints from cadets at the [Air Force Academy](#) that evangelical Christian officers used their positions to proselytize. In general, the armed forces have regulations, Ms. Lainez said, that respect “the rights of others to their own religious beliefs, including the right to hold no beliefs.”

To Specialist Hall and other critics of the military, the guidelines have done little to change a culture they say tilts heavily toward evangelical Christianity. Controversies have continued to flare, largely over tactics used by evangelicals to promote their faith. Perhaps the most high-profile incident involved seven officers, including four generals, who

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appeared, in uniform and in violation of military regulations, in a 2006 fund-raising video for the Christian Embassy, an evangelical Bible study group.

"They don't trust you because they think you are unreliable and might break, since you don't have God to rely on," Specialist Hall said of those who proselytize in the military. "The message is, 'It's a Christian nation, and you need to recognize that.'"

Soft-spoken and younger looking than his 23 years, Specialist Hall began a chapter of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers at Camp Speicher, near Tikrit, to support others like him.

At the July meeting, Major Welborn told the soldiers they had disgraced those who had died for the Constitution, Specialist Hall said. When he finished, Major Welborn said, according to the statement: "I love you guys; I just want the best for you. One day you will see the truth and know what I mean."

Major Welborn declined to comment beyond saying, "I'd love to tell my side of the story because it's such a false story."

But Timothy Feary, the other soldier at the meeting, said in an e-mail message: "Jeremy is telling the truth. I was there and witnessed everything."

It is unclear how widespread religious discrimination or proselytizing is in the armed forces, constitutional law experts and leaders of veterans' groups said. No one has independently studied the issue, and service members are reluctant to come forward because of possible backlash, those experts said.

There are 1.36 million active duty service members, according to the Pentagon, and since 2005, it has received 50 formal complaints of religious discrimination, Ms. Lainez said.

In an e-mail statement, Bill Carr, the Defense Department's deputy under secretary for military personnel policy, said he "saw near universal compliance with the department's policy."

But Mikey Weinstein, a retired Air Force judge advocate general and founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, said the official statistics masked the great number of those who do not report violations for fear of retribution. Since the Air Force Academy scandal began in 2004, Mr. Weinstein said, he has been contacted by more than 5,500 service members and, occasionally, military families about incidents of religious discrimination. He said 96 percent of the complainants were Christians, and the majority of those were Protestants.

Complaints include prayers "in Jesus' name" at mandatory functions, which violates military regulations, and officers proselytizing subordinates to be "born again." After getting the complainants' unit and command information, Mr. Weinstein said, he calls his contacts in the military to try to correct the situation.

"Religion is inextricably intertwined with their jobs," Mr. Weinstein said. "You're promoted by who you pray with."

Specialist Hall came to atheism after years as a Christian. He was raised Baptist by his grandmother in Richlands, N.C., a town of fewer than 1,000 people. She read the Bible to him every night, and he said he joined the Army "to make something of myself."

"I thought going to Iraq was right because we had God on our side," he said in an interview near Fort Riley.

In the summer of 2005, after his first deployment to Iraq, Specialist Hall became friends with soldiers with atheist leanings. Their questions about faith prompted him to read the Bible more closely, which bred doubts that deepened over time.

"There are so many religions in the world," he said. "Everyone thinks he's right. Who is right? Even people who are Christians think other Christians are wrong."



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Specialist Hall said he did not advertise his atheism. But his views became apparent during his second deployment in 2006. At a Thanksgiving meal, someone at his table asked everyone to pray. Specialist Hall did not join in, explaining to a sergeant that he did not believe in God. The sergeant got angry, he said, and told him to go to another table.

After his run-in with Major Welborn, Specialist Hall did not file a complaint with the Army's Equal Opportunity Office because, he said, he was mistrustful of his superior officers. Instead, he told leaders of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, who put him in touch with Mr. Weinstein. In November 2007, Specialist Hall was sent home early from Iraq after being repeatedly threatened by other soldiers. "I caution you that although your 'legal' issues are yours and yours alone, I have heard many people disagree with you, and this may be a cause for some of the perceived threats," wrote Sgt. Maj. Kevin Nolan in Specialist Hall's counseling for his departure.

Though with a different unit now at Fort Riley, Specialist Hall said the backlash had continued. He has a no-contact order with a sergeant who, without provocation, threatened to "bust him in the mouth." Another sergeant allegedly told Specialist Hall that as an atheist, he was not entitled to religious freedom because he had no religion.

Responding to questions about Specialist Hall's experience at Fort Riley, the staff judge advocate, Col. Arnold Scott, said in an e-mail message, "In accordance with Army policy, Fort Riley is committed to ensuring the rights of all its soldiers are protected, including those of Specialist Hall."

Civilian courts in the past have been reluctant to take on military cases, and the Justice Department has yet to respond to Specialist Hall's lawsuit.

"Even if it doesn't go through, I stood up," Specialist Hall said. "I don't think it is futile."

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