



Wayne Adkins (right, shown here with Gen. B.B. Bell, far left) is a nontheist who served in the National Guard for eight years before resigning after repeated ostracizing and after his formal discrimination complaint was bungled and ultimately dropped.



FIT TO SERVE

*Nontheistic Soldiers Speak Out
against “Spiritual Fitness” Test*

BY STEVEN SURMAN

FORT HOOD’S sprawling 340-square-mile property—one of the largest active armored posts in the United States Armed Forces—boasts the self-styled title of the “Great Place” because of the quality of life enjoyed by soldiers and family members residing on its premises. Indeed, Fort Hood, which is located halfway between Waco and Austin, Texas, has in recent years expanded its reputation toward rejuvenating the wellness of soldiers and their families by nurturing a trinity of the body, mind, and spirit.

The stronghold for this task is the fort’s Resiliency Campus, which houses the Spiritual Fitness Center, a facility functioning on the edict that all human beings are comprised of three components: the physical (body), the mental (mind), and the spiritual (soul). These three attributes are interwoven and interdependent, and the center operates as a contemporary shrine for religious leaders and the community as a whole to turn to in the search for serenity. But along with ministering to the immediate needs of Fort Hood, the center serves a greater purpose: it acts as a religious outpost for the Global Assessment Tool, or GAT, a roughly 200-question self-appraisal that’s part of the Army’s Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program. “Religion,” incidentally, is a word used by the GAT with guile—rather, the neutered term “spirituality” takes precedence.

But nearly 1,500 miles away from Fort Hood in Washington, DC, Jason Torpy is having none of it. Torpy, currently serving as the president of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF), is unsettled by the GAT and CSF openly arbitrating the spiritual and religious beliefs of soldiers and has expressed his concern to a number of military officials. Notably, he presented his case for two hours to Lt. Col. Jesse Henderson, the CSF content manager.

“I presented our concerns and he met each one with apathy and an inability to understand the problem. [Lt. Col. Henderson] refused to accept any of the suggestions I made,” Torpy recalls. But he wasn’t deterred and pursued the matter to the highest level within the CSF: Brig. Gen. Rhonda Cornum, the program’s director. But she was no more concerned than anyone else.

A Grand Assumption

The bureaucratic indifference shown by the CSF officials was no great shock to Torpy, who understands the inner mechanisms of the Army first-hand. During his years of service (1994 to 2005) he earned the rank of captain, and toured in Iraq from 2003 to 2004. His service refutes the old, persistent adage that there are no atheists in foxholes. Though Torpy was raised Catholic, he never accepted the instruction and identified as an atheist from an early age.

In his current role as the MAAF president, the thirty-four-year-old immerses himself in all issues pertaining to the military and how religion is presented and utilized within its vast organizational network, from chaplain outreach to maintaining an open and proud roster of newly dubbed “atheists in foxholes.” The MAAF was founded back in 1997 by retired M. Sgt. Kathleen Johnson (now the military director for American Atheists). MAAF’s ultimate goal is to win recognition of and respect for nontheist rights, but the spiritual fitness test is a stinging reminder that Torpy must still travel a long road. At the same time Torpy acknowledges that his group shares the general mission of the CSF and GAT: “To minimize combat stress as well as more serious issues such as PTSD and suicides.”

Implemented in 2009, the \$117 million CSF program was developed by the University of Pennsylvania and is described on its official website as a “long-term strategy that better prepares the Army community... to not only survive, but also thrive at a cognitive and behavioral level in the face of protracted warfare and everyday challenges of Army life.” Further claims say that the CSF is founded on thirty years of research and employs various tactics to help evaluate and improve the physical and mental welfare of soldiers. The most notable is the GAT—a 105-question evaluation focused on five core dimensions: the physical, emotional, social, familial, and spiritual. The GAT is currently an annual requirement for all soldiers, and Army officials involved, including Cornum and Lt. Col. David Petersen (an Army spokesman) have said that the GAT is a private and personal tool intended only for the soldier taking it. All results are confidential.

But despite assurances, the spiritual fitness portion of the GAT hasn’t been well received. Several reporters, including NPR’s Barbara Bradley Hagerty and Religion News Service’s Adelle M. Banks, have written on the contents of the examination. Statements such as, “I am a spiritual person,” and, “In difficult times, I pray or meditate,” are present. Another statement



A former Army Captain, Jason Torpy now serves as the president of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers.

pushes the matter further: “I believe that in some way my life is closely connected to all of humanity. I often find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.”

If negative responses are provided, soldiers are given the following results: “Spiritual fitness may be an area of difficulty. You may lack a sense of meaning or purpose in your life. At times, it is hard for you to make sense of what is happening to you and others around you. You may not feel connected to something larger than yourself. You may question your beliefs, principles, and values. Improving your spiritual fitness should be an important goal.”

While the GAT is Army-wide, it doesn’t represent the full breadth of personalities and traits found amongst its test-taking pool. It makes a grand assumption that religion is a necessary tool when coping with the mental and physical stress inherently found in a career of combat. For this, Torpy says the CSF program needs to be entirely reformed. Instead of assuming that a religious soldier is more “fit” to serve than a nonreligious one, Torpy wants the Army, along with the whole of the military, to acknowledge its diversity and strive to be completely free of favoritism.

“That way...the Army can ensure that all service members have the best opportunity for excellence in the military mission,” Torpy concludes.

“Spiritual Fitness Failure”

The military’s ever-increasing inclination to promote religion within its ranks has drawn the white-knuckled ire of many, including secular activist Stuart Bechman. In his current role as the development director of the Institute of Humanist Studies, Bechman has a long history of promoting secularism and nontheist rights. His past experience includes serving as the president of Atheist Alliance International from 2008

to 2010 and sitting on the board of the Secular Coalition for America until 2010.

Bechman doesn't shy away from the issue of religion in the military: "A clear pattern of significant proselytizing, supported at the highest levels of the military, has been documented over the past two decades," Bechman says. The history he speaks of is now crowned by the spiritual fitness test, an invasion of privacy Bechman denounces as "outrageously objectionable" and "inappropriate."

Many agree, including Chris Rodda, the senior research director of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) and author of *Liars for Jesus: The Religious Right's Alternate Version of American History*. Rodda has been chronicling the military's religiosity at the *Huffington Post*, and in August 2009 she documented congressional members involved with the efforts of the "Family" (a secretive religious organization that espouses a tyrannical relationship between the Bible, laissez-faire capitalism, and geopolitical power) to earmark tens of millions of dollars to erect churches on military bases around the country.

The GAT currently weighs on the mind of MRFF founder and president Michael Weinstein, who is launching hundreds of lawsuits on behalf of soldiers (some nontheist, but many of them not) who believe their privacy has been violated by the test's probing of their personal beliefs. But for the hundreds who have stepped forward seeking the MRFF's help, there are potentially thousands more who are unable to do so for fear of swift reprisal.

An email with a subject line reading, "I Am A 'Spiritual Fitness Failure,'" was sent to the MRFF from a battle-worn soldier and subsequently posted at *Huffington Post* by Rodda (MRFF withheld his name and information to ensure his anonymity). The soldier had been deployed six times (at the time of this writing, he awaits his seventh) to Iraq and Afghanistan on heavy combat assignments. During his service, he has earned



Stuart Bechman of the Institute for Humanist Studies has been a vocal critic of proselytizing in the military.

the Combat Action Badge, the Bronze Star, and multiple Purple Hearts for having been wounded four times, including a "traumatic brain injury." And even though this soldier identifies as a Christian, he still failed the spiritual fitness test.

Is there an inherent characteristic that makes a religious soldier more capable in combat than a nonreligious one? The emphasis on spiritual fitness certainly seems to support this proposition.

But confidentiality of his results wasn't a privilege he enjoyed: upon completion, the First Sergeant of the soldier's unit questioned his score. Because the test deemed him spiritually unfit, the sergeant ordered the soldier to schedule an appointment with a chaplain.

The chaplain didn't offer counsel so much as a proselytizing lecture on evangelical Christianity. As the soldier stated in his email to the MRFF:

When this chaplain told me that I failed the [spiritual fitness test] because it was [Jesus'] way of personally knocking on my door as an invitation for me to come to Him as a [born-again, real Christian] so that I could be saved and not burn forever in hell for rejecting him, I thought of... the fact that I was already born a Christian and did not need to be born again... [and] I thought of my battle buddy... who took a bullet for me in his face during [battle]... and that he was the same kind of Christian as me and this chaplain is telling me that my battle buddy... is burning in hell for all time."

The email continues to laud Weinstein and the rest of the MRFF for defending the rights of the voiceless. "Please tell your lawyers... not to forget about those of us who want to speak up and thank them all but cannot," the soldier concludes.

Worth and Dignity

When Wayne Adkins was twenty-three-years-old, his destiny was clear. He served four years in the Army and was prepared to invest his G.I. Bill earnings into a Pastoral Theology degree from Baptist Bible College (BBC). With it, he would ful-

fill his dream of becoming a Baptist preacher. But BBC proved counter-productive: instead of bringing Adkins closer to his religion, it pushed him away. He studiously poured over the Bible, and with each passing day of close scrutiny, he increasingly questioned the text's validity as a legitimate document—ultimately drawing the scorn of the BBC community.

“I was told that the problem [was] with me, that it was vanity [that] compelled me to know the answers to everything,” Adkins recalls. He remained at BBC for two years before leaving, the departure hallmarking his loss of faith: when he walked away from college, he left behind his belief in God and the Bible. Eventually Adkins moved back to Ohio, where he lived prior, and enlisted with the National Guard, serving from 1999 to 2007. He toured in the Middle East with the Public Affairs office and earned the rank of First Lieutenant.

The phrase, “there are no atheists in foxholes,” crossed Adkins’ desk regularly during this time. But his grudging tolerance for it ended in 2006 upon returning home: Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, the National Guard Bureau (NGB) Commander at the time, made reference to there being no atheists in foxholes during a speech to the NAACP. Adkins found the remarks beyond offensive—what was he if not an atheist in the foxhole? Because Blum was within his direct chain of command, Adkins filed a formal complaint of discrimination, which turned into a tangled web of bureaucratic mismanagement between the Ohio Army National Guard, the NGB’s Equal Opportunity Office, and the Department of the Army Inspector General’s Office (DAIG). Letters, email, and phone calls were bounced and lost between the three offices from August to November 2006, when Adkins had to discover through the Freedom of Information Act that his charge was dropped by DAIG.

Adkins began to question his position in the National Guard in November of that year, just as he did his religion years before. Twice ostracized for his beliefs, he took a stand by resigning. In his official letter of resignation, Adkins stated the following: “I can no longer be part of an organization that denies my service in combat, ignores discrimination complaints by soldiers, violates its own regulations, and protects bigots.”

The life story of Wayne Adkins, now forty-three, offers him an advantageous perspective into the recent marriage of the military with evangelical Christianity, a union that is presided over by the Chaplain Corps. Chaplains administer religious ceremonies and offer counsel to service members. “Does the [Army’s] Chaplains Corps use their rank and role as advisors to promote religion? Absolutely,” he says.

Jason Torpy is more magnanimous. “[Chaplains] individually pledge to carry out their duties honorably and to be respectful of the pluralistic military community... [they] provide a wide range of secular services in addition to their niche abilities [of] faith,” he says. But the spiritual fitness test bequeaths chaplains with a new charge: saving lost souls. Tim Townsend, a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, wrote in January 2011 that there is an increase in chaplains belonging to an evangelical faith, such as Southern Baptist or Pentecostalism. He cites Pentagon statistics

that state evangelical chaplains make up 33 percent of the entire pool, whereas only 3 percent of enlisted personnel identify with an evangelical religion. Furthermore, Air Force data claims that 87 percent of individuals intent on becoming chaplains are enrolled in evangelical divinity schools.

Torpy differs on the numbers, however. The MAAF conducted their own six-month study with help from the Department of Defense, discovering that “evangelistic” (denominations primarily focused on the Great Commission) personnel comprise 18.5 percent, whereas evangelistic chaplains are at nearly 70 percent. The MAAF further learned that 23.4 percent of Defense personnel identify as nontheist or without preference—note that there is no direct representation of humanism or nontheism within the chaplaincy. The disparity rises with Catholicism: over 20 percent of Defense personnel identify as Catholic, but less than 10 percent of chaplains throughout the department are Catholic.

Drawing from his Baptist history, Adkins worries that this shift towards an evangelical chaplaincy could negatively affect the Army and military as a whole. “It demonstrates that these people see themselves as missionaries and the military as their own personal mission field... potential chaplains [are simply asked] if they feel they can administer to all soldiers. There is no vetting,” Adkins says.

The emphasis on religion in the military and the chaplains who tend to it raises a vexing quandary: is there an inherent characteristic that makes a religious soldier more capable in combat than a nonreligious one? The emphasis on spiritual fitness certainly seems to support this proposition. But what of the men and women who have, do, and will serve in the military that either don’t believe in religion or prefer to practice in private? Will they ever be free of outside evaluation and influence?

“Integrity is paramount... [It] ensures that soldiers are self-disciplined, that rules are followed, and in the absence of rules a soldier still does the right thing,” Adkins says.

Torpy and the MAAF agree, which is why they continue to work toward a resolution on the entire issue. The organization hopes to rework the “spirituality” dimension of the CSF and GAT to include all soldiers by basing it upon natural, human characteristics and traits, regardless of spiritual or religious practices. To that end, Torpy is even working through both military and non-theist channels to present humanist candidates for the chaplaincy in an attempt to help neutralize the rapidly growing presence of proselytizers in the trenches.

Ultimately, it’s about recognizing the needs and beliefs of all service members, and not harboring favoritism for those inclined towards any particular supernatural belief, despite the label of spiritual or religious. “What we should do instead is celebrate the worth and dignity of all service members by removing special privileges for religion,” Torpy concludes. ■

Steven Surman is a freelance writer. Learn more on his website: www.stevensurman.com.