

Former Guantanamo chaplain wants U.S. Army apology

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[REPATRIATE DAVID HICKS NOW!]

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Capt. James Yee spent 76 days in solitary confinement, much of the time shackled and in leg irons, after accusations of sedition, espionage and aiding the enemy while serving as a Muslim chaplain at Guantanamo Bay.

The Army's case against him collapsed at trial, and it eventually wiped his record clean and gave the West Point graduate an honorable discharge.

Two years later, he is still waiting for an apology. "Since my case was dismissed, nobody has taken responsibility for what happened to me," he said in an interview. "Nobody has explained what went wrong or why. Nobody apologized."

Yee says the way he was treated damaged the reputation of military justice and is one of the reasons why American Muslims are reluctant to join the military at a time when it needs Arabic speakers as it wages war in two Muslim countries.

(For a related story see "Fear of bias keeps U.S. Muslims out of military")

"If the Pentagon came out and said 'we admit we made a mistake,' it would show the integrity of the system. An apology would make the military stronger."

Despite what he calls humiliating treatment driven by bigotry, ignorance and mistrust, Yee said he would consider rejoining the military if there were a formal apology. "I'm waiting for the outcome of an investigation by the (Pentagon's) Inspector General."

The Pentagon has given no indication of when the investigation might be completed. It began in December, 2004, after written requests to then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld by lawmakers.

Since leaving the Army, Yee has written a book about his ordeal, "For God and Country, Faith and Patriotism Under Fire," and given lectures at universities and Muslim community centers around the country.

ABUSE ENCOURAGED?

Critics of the United States around the world see the detention of prisoners at its naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, as a symbol of American disregard for international law.

In his book, which became a bestseller in Indonesia but had limited success in the United States, Yee portrays an environment in which guards were encouraged to abuse prisoners by the prison commander, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller.

Miller went to Iraq in 2003 to step up intelligence gathering from prisoners there. He refused to

testify in the courts martial in January last year of two dog handlers charged with prisoner abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison, invoking his constitutional right to avoid self incrimination. He retired six months later and received a Distinguished Service Medal for meritorious service in a ceremony at the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes.

Yee said he prompted the ire of senior officers at Guantanamo by drawing attention to U.S. soldiers abusing the Koran, mocking Islam and stripping prisoners of their dignity. After he was arrested and taken to a Navy brig in Jacksonville, Florida, he said he was subjected to similar treatment.

"My cell was 8 foot by 6 foot, the same size as the detainees' cages at Guantanamo," he wrote in his book. "Now I was the one in chains. It was my turn to be humiliated every time I was taken to a shower. Naked, I had to run my hands through my hair to show that I was not concealing a weapon. Then mouth open, tongue up, down, nothing inside."

"Right arm up, nothing in my armpit. Left arm up. Lift the right testicle, nothing hidden. Lift the left. Turn around, bend over, spread your buttocks, knowing a camera was displaying my naked image as male and female guards watched. It didn't matter that I was an army captain, a graduate of West Point, the elite U.S. military academy.

The fact that he had not been charged at that time and his religious beliefs prohibited him from being fully naked in front of strangers did not matter to his captors, he said in the interview. "So, if that kind of justice, that kind of treatment, is given to a U.S. citizen, what can a foreigner expect?"

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