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Honor guardsman is fired for blessings

Patrick Cabbage says he followed his training. A supervisor calls it a breach.

By David O'Reilly
Inquirer Staff Writer

As a military honor guardsman, Patrick Cabbage had a simple message to the families of deceased veterans at graveside services.



GERALD S. WILLIAMS / Inquirer

"God bless you and this family, and God bless the United States of America," he would say as he presented a folded flag to them.

Patrick Cabbage, at the veterans cemetery in Burlington County where he once worked, used to tell mourners: "God bless you and this family, and God bless the United States of America."

Because of that, Cabbage was fired in October from his job at the Brig. Gen. William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Burlington County, near McGuire Air Force Base.

He breached cemetery protocol, his supervisor said, by deviating from the script.

"No family member ever objected," Cabbage, 54, a Vietnam combat veteran, retired Philadelphia police officer, and former city bail commissioner, said in a recent interview at his Northeast

Philadelphia home.

"They were always very grateful - and sometimes very moved. People would even grip my hand and say things like 'Thank you so much.' "

Cubbage said he found the blessing in training literature he got when he began working as a part-time guardsman at Doyle, making \$16 an hour, in October 2001.

But Lt. Col. Roberta Niedt, spokeswoman for the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, said Doyle - the state's largest veterans cemetery - has a "standard phrase [for the flag presentation] for each service."

Cubbage was dismissed not for the blessing, Niedt said, but for departing from the standard presentation protocol.

Cubbage insisted, however, that he was operating within the rules for honor guards. Opening a slender pamphlet that he said the cemetery gave him when he started, he turned to a page topped by the words *Flag Presentation Protocol*.

After Taps, it explains, the honor guard folds an American flag into a triangle, and a guardsman then steps before the appropriate family member.

Depending on the branch of service, the presenter next is to say such words as: "This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful nation and the United States Army as a token of appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service," and then to hand the flag to the deceased's kin.

"If the next of kin has expressed a religious preference or belief," the instructions continue, "add: 'God bless you and this family, and God bless the United States of America.' "

"It doesn't say, 'You *may* add ...,' " Cubbage, an evangelical Christian who attends Calvary Chapel in Northeast Philadelphia, said as he tapped sternly at the pamphlet. "And I said it only if the family had a chapel service or had clergy at the grave."

Although a part-time employee at Doyle, he said, he typically worked from 25 to 35 hours a week, and he estimated that he participated in about 2,000 burial ceremonies last year. "I probably said the blessing 500 times."

But two of his fellow honor guardsmen complained in October, he said, and on Oct. 16 Iven Dumas, the cemetery's honor guard coordinator, ordered him to stop the blessings.

He said he protested, noting, "It's right in the manual." Dumas

replied that the blessing could offend Jews and Muslims, he said, and should be used only when next of kin notify the cemetery office that they want a blessing.

"Jews and Muslims believe in God," Cabbage said he replied.

Dumas, he said, responded by handing him a copy of state regulations prohibiting "harassment or hostile environments" in the workplace.

Dumas declined to be interviewed and referred inquiries to Niedt's office.

On Oct. 24, Joan L. Edwards, affirmative-action officer for the state Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, wrote to Dumas to clarify policy. Cabbage received a photocopy of the letter.

Government employees "must not engage in activities or expression that a reasonable observer would interpret as government endorsement ... of religion," she wrote.

Unless the next of kin expresses a religious preference "one way or another," she continued, "then, the protocol would be to omit the saying, 'God bless ...,' portion of the presentation. This is not optional."

Cabbage said he reluctantly stopped saying the blessing - until Oct. 31. That day, he said, "this funeral procession pulls in for a burial, and I see the 'fish' sign [a traditional symbol in Christianity] on the back of one of the cars."

"So, I start a conversation with the driver, who turns out to belong to Calvary Chapel. I asked him if the family would mind if I said the blessing. He said, 'Oh, they're very religious. I'm sure they'd welcome it.' "

The widow, who was in a wheelchair, bowed her head at the blessing, Cabbage recalled.

But one of the other guardsmen "practically ran to the office" to report him, he said.

He said Dumas called him into the office and demanded an explanation. He said he explained that a family friend had assured him they would welcome the blessing, but Dumas - citing Cabbage's "disregard for stated policy" - fired him that day.

"I was in shock. I'm still in shock," he said.

"I was proud to serve the veterans who have served us," said Cabbage, who in 2001 reenlisted in the New Jersey National Guard just so that he could be the first enlisted man to salute his son,

Adam, when he became an Army officer.

Adam Cabbage is now a captain in the 108th Air Squadron - his father's unit in the Vietnam War.

"I just don't get it," Patrick Cabbage said of his firing. "When you give people that flag, you see them look into it and remember a whole time in their loved one's life. So why in God's name did they fire me? Because in God's name, they *did* fire me."

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