

In recognizing multiple faiths, the US military moves beyond its shameful past

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The Rev. Bill Devine, 7th Marine Regiment Chaplain, speaks to U.S. Marines assigned to the 5th Marine Regiment during a Catholic Mass at one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in Tikrit, Iraq, on Apr. 19, 2003. Photo courtesy of U.S. Marine Corps/Lance Cpl. Andrew P. Roufs

(RNS) As a freshly minted rabbi, I was an Air Force chaplain at Itazuke Air Base in Japan. Two days after my arrival at the base, I was officially introduced to Itazuke's commander. He was a gruff fighter pilot who in physical appearance and style of speaking could have

been John Wayne's clone.

The colonel did not ask me to sit down. He never looked up from his desk, made no eye contact with me, and muttered: "Chaplain, you Air Force 'holy Joes' need to dispense religion like toothpaste. Just squeeze out your religions for the troops. Frankly, I have no preference for a specific toothpaste or a particular religion; for me they are all the same. Welcome to Itazuke, Chaplain; do your duty and good luck." The meeting was over. In a way, the base commander was correct. For many years, there were only three kinds of religious "toothpaste" in the military: Judaism, Catholicism and Protestantism. And for decades all chaplains wore one of two special insignias on their uniforms, a cross or two tablets with 10 Roman numerals symbolizing the Ten Commandments with a six-pointed Star of David above the tablets. The Roman numerals were historically inappropriate, even insulting, since it was the despised Roman Empire that destroyed Judaism's Holy Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. So I was pleased when in 1981, the insignia's Roman numbers were replaced with the first 10 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. And the days are over when the U.S. military acknowledged only three major religious groups within its ranks. As of April, the Department of Defense officially recognized at least 221 religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Unitarianism, paganism, atheism, humanism and agnosticism, as well as Wicca, druidism and many more. The extensive Pentagon list also differentiated among the various streams of Judaism and the diverse Protestant communities. A total of 22 percent of the men and women in today's military list "none" when queried about their religious identification. As a result, all military personnel, whatever their religion or lack of one, must be afforded equal rights, privileges and protections. This belated recognition of the rich religious diversity that exists today is an extraordinary change and is light-years away from one of the most shameful chapters in the long history of the American military chaplaincy. On March 26, 1945, a now historic controversy erupted when Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn, a U.S. Navy chaplain who served with the Marines during the bitter and bloody battle of Iwo Jima, was invited to deliver the main memorial address at an interreligious dedication of the military cemetery on the tiny island. When several Christian chaplains objected to a Jew officiating over Christian graves, his invitation was withdrawn. The interreligious dedication was scrapped and Gittelsohn instead dedicated a cemetery where only dead Jewish Marines were freshly buried. However, in a show of solidarity, three Christian chaplains attended the service. They were so deeply moved by the rabbi's eloquent words they distributed his remarks to other military chaplains throughout the world. Ironically, the powerful eulogy Gittelsohn had originally written for the aborted interreligious service, excerpted here, became the best-known and still widely read sermon of World War II: "Here no man prefers another because of his faith or despises him because of his color. ... Here there are no quotas of how many from each group are admitted or allowed. Among these men there is no discrimination. No prejudices. No hatred. There is the highest and purest democracy. ... Whosoever of us lifts his hand in hate against a brother, or who thinks himself superior to those who happen to be in the minority, makes of this ceremony and the bloody sacrifice it commemorates, an empty, hollow mockery. ... " After the war, Gittelsohn became the senior rabbi of Temple Israel in Boston, the author of many significant theological books and president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Shortly before his death in 1995, Gittelsohn offered the closing prayer at the Iwo Jima Memorial in Arlington, Va., commemorating the 50th anniversary of that horrific battle. Gittelsohn reflected, "I have often wondered whether anyone would ever have heard of my Iwo Jima sermon had it not been for the bigoted attempt to ban it." I think even my base commander would recognize that Roland Gittelsohn and many other military chaplains "dispense" much more than spiritual "toothpaste." (Rabbi A. James Rudin is the American Jewish Committee's senior interreligious adviser. His latest book is "Pillar of Fire: The Biography of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise," published by Texas Tech University Press. He can be reached at jamesrudin.com)