

# Controversy erupts over Bible in Okinawa naval hospital display

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Navy officials are investigating complaints about the placement of a Bible in a public display about POW/MIAs at the U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa, the service's largest overseas medical facility.

The investigation, opened April 6, follows the filing of a complaint by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit established to promote religious freedom in the U.S. military.

The complaint was brought on behalf of 26 military families on the Japanese island of Okinawa, the majority of them Christian, according to the foundation. They hold that the religiosity of the display violates the Constitution, in particular the First Amendment clause that prohibits government establishment of religion.

The complaint notes the Bible is part of "an official, command-endorsed display" and is "endorsing Christianity ... to the total exclusion of any other belief systems or non-belief systems."

Foundation president Mikey Weinstein said he also was concerned about a placard on the display, in Japanese and English, which read in part, "The Bible represents the strength gained through faith to sustain those lost from our country, founded one nation under God."

A Bible and similar language were suggested in the Navy's official blog in 2014 for display tables honoring prisoners of war and military members missing in action. But Weinstein said the placard's wording and its translation into Japanese amounts to evangelization.

“We’re having our lawyers look at whether or not this violates the Status of Forces Agreement, or the treaty we have with Japan,” he said. “Christianity gets no special treatment in the eyes of the law.”

But Mark Stephensen, vice chairman of the National League of POW/MIA Families, disagrees, saying there was “no bias intended” in placing a Bible on a “Missing Man” table.

“The Bible was always intended to be there,” said Stephensen, of Boise, Idaho. “The POWs held in Hanoi vehemently turned to God for comfort and safety and persistence.”

The remains of Stephensen’s father, U.S. Air Force Col. Mark Stephensen, were returned from Vietnam 21 years after the aircraft he was piloting went down.

“I don’t see where the harm is,” Stephensen added. “If somebody’s going to take offense to it, they’re making a conscious effort to be offended.”

Asked about the POW/MIA group’s position, Weinstein said the American Legion does not require a Bible at its “Missing Man” displays, though some legion posts suggest its inclusion.