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Investigation into Lackland sergeant's claim of improper removal concludes

JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO-RANDOLPH, Texas – Air Education and Training Command completed an investigation into a claim an airman made publicly that his commander removed him from a leadership position because of his personally held beliefs about homosexuality.

The investigation, initiated Aug. 15 by Col. Mark Camerer, 37th Training Wing commander at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, found the claim unsubstantiated. The investigation also looked into whether Senior Master Sgt. Phillip Monk made false official statements. It concluded statements he made were false; however, they did not rise to a level that violated Articles 107 and/or 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Monk asserted through interviews with several national media outlets that he was improperly removed from his position as first sergeant of the 326th Training Squadron at Lackland because he did not agree with his commander's position on same-sex marriage.

"I felt the need to conduct a thorough review to ensure no Air Force policies were violated, and the investigating officer provided that," Camerer said. "Ultimately I wanted to be sure all facts were collected so we could determine if there was merit to the sergeant's statements."

The investigation concluded Monk was not removed from his position, but rather moved, as scheduled, to another Lackland unit, an assignment he was notified of in April 2013. The report stated Monk never voiced a religious or moral objection about same sex marriage to his commander.

"The weight of the evidence shows that religion was never discussed between the two," Camerer said. "In the end, this is a case about command authority, good order and discipline, and civil rights—not religious freedoms."

According to the report, the incident in question occurred when Monk disagreed with the corrective action his commander planned to take against a military training instructor who made discriminatory remarks against homosexuals during a teaching session with basic trainees on July 20. The commander, in consultation with the base legal advisor, concluded the statements crossed the line, were discriminatory in nature, and required administrative action. Monk argued that administrative action was inappropriate because the MTI was exercising his right to free speech.

The investigating officer, an Air Force colonel, wrote in his report, "Based on his training as a first sergeant, Senior Master Sgt. Monk should have known that discriminatory remarks on the basis of sexual orientation are against Air Force Policy. He should have also known, while Air Force members do have the right to speech and religion, that right does not mean airmen can say whatever they want, whenever they want."

The commander told Monk her decision to counsel the instructor was final, at which point Monk requested two weeks of official leave until his replacement arrived, which she approved. Monk was on leave from July 29 to Aug. 12, the same day the squadron's new first sergeant reported for duty, a move approved for several months. On Aug. 12, Monk began his previously accepted position with the 59th Medical Wing.

Col. Camerer ultimately sees this matter as important for a number of reasons.

"The military is dependent upon good order and discipline, and all members are expected to respect command authority and adhere to lawful and necessary command decisions," he said. "The ethos we operate under ensures that, while all Air Force members are free to maintain their beliefs, we must also always treat each other with dignity and respect so we can serve our country with unity and professionalism."

The Air Force will not take any disciplinary actions against either Monk or his commander, as a result of this investigation. The investigation is now closed.