

Navy rejects request for first humanist chaplain

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

June 3, 2014

c. 2014 Religion News Service

(RNS) After the Army recently permitted “humanist” as a religious preference, many hoped a humanist chaplain might follow.

But the Navy last week rejected the application of Jason Heap for a commission, a Navy official familiar with the case confirmed. The details of the decision were not divulged due to privacy concerns.

Heap was not immediately available for comment, but groups that have pushed for his commission—and other accommodations for nontheistic members of the military—were disappointed.

“The Humanist Society and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers have provided years of outreach and a great chaplain candidate to the military,” said Jason Torpy, president of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers. “We hope nonchaplain military leaders swiftly overturn this discriminatory decision.”

Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association, also called for a reversal of the decision.

“Prejudice is not an American value,” he said.

But the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty welcomed the decision.

“Chaplains, historically and by definition, are people of faith,” said retired reserve Chaplain Ron Crews, executive director of the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty. “You can’t have an ‘atheist chaplain’ any more than you can have a ‘tiny giant’ or a ‘poor millionaire.’”

Many humanists are atheists but some say that the term “atheist” is not sufficient to express their belief, or lack of it. They often emphasize their confidence in the

human potential.

Army Maj. Ray Bradley, who was allowed in April to use “humanist” as his religious preference after a two-year wait, said the term best describes his life stance, which stresses scientific explanations and maximizing human happiness.

Most applicants did not receive recommendations when the Navy recently reviewed applications for chaplain commissions.

“Due to the highly competitive nature of the board, less than 50 percent of the applicants could be recommended for a commission in the United States Navy,” said Lt. Hayley C. Sims, a spokeswoman for the chief of naval personnel.

Heap, who was endorsed by the Humanist Society and holds master’s degrees from Brite Divinity School and Oxford University, told Religion News Service last year that he had completed all the paperwork and passed the necessary physical tests.

“This is my chance to give back to my country,” he said at the time. “I want to use my skills on behalf of our people in the service.”

There are about 2,900 active-duty chaplains in the U.S. military, and most are Christian.

Humanist chaplains serve in the militaries of Belgium and the Netherlands.

Commander Erwin Kamp has served for 15 years in the Dutch armed forces, where he is one of 38 humanist chaplains in a force of 150. He said some of the humanist chaplains are atheists and others agnostic.

“No one believes in a higher power like God,” he said. “We believe in the power of human beings and their possibilities.”