

Military atheists get ready to 'rock beyond belief'

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(RNS) After more than a year of planning, atheists in the military will stage a public festival and rock concert celebrating their lack of religious beliefs at North Carolina's Fort Bragg, one of the largest U.S. military bases.

Dubbed "Rock Beyond Belief," the event is believed to be the first of its kind to highlight "freethought" -- atheism, humanism and skepticism -- on a U.S. military base.

Organizers hope the March 31 event will lead to broader recognition and support of nonbelievers in the armed forces, where they say they receive little support and often discrimination from an overly Christianized military.

"This is perhaps the first step in a new direction away from the evangelical proselytism that has permeated the military for decades," said Sgt. Justin Griffith, an atheist serving at Fort Bragg and the event's chief organizer.

Griffith said the concert is a "bitter pill" for some of his superiors on base, which is home to the storied 82nd Airborne Division, "but they get it. They are supporting us and I am really proud of them."

The event, which will be open to the public, will include music and public speakers, including Richard Dawkins, a best-selling author of several books, including "The God Delusion." Base officials expect approximately 5,000 people to attend.

How many of those will be atheists is an open question. According to the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, which analyzed a Department of Defense census, Christians account for 68 percent of the military population, while those who state "no religious preference" make up the second-largest

group, at 23 percent. Those who choose to have "atheist" stamped on their dog tags account for less than 1 percent.

Many military nontheists report being the unwelcome targets of proselytism, sometimes by superiors, and complain of compulsory religious prayers and practices at official events. One area of growing concern is the mandatory assessment of soldiers' "spiritual fitness," which they say is both unconstitutional and an attempt to proselytize.

"If you are a nonreligious soldier, you are a third-class citizen in the U.S. military," said Mikey Weinstein, president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a military watchdog group, who will attend the event in Fayetteville, N.C.

"You are basically told that you lack intellectual integrity, courage, character and honorability . . . Rock Beyond Belief is an attempt to stick a fist up in the sky and say, 'We have our rights.'"

The idea for Rock Beyond Belief grew out of "Rock the Fort," a Christian-themed concert held at Fort Bragg in September 2010. That event, staged by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, included Christian music, speakers and an altar call for attendees to publicly embrace or affirm their Christianity.

That upset many nonreligious service members at Fort Bragg, including Griffith, who has been an atheist for 12 years. He asked officials for equal time and support for an atheist-themed event.

Griffith said he initially met with resistance -- piles of paperwork to file, approvals to obtain, proof of interest and financing plans. An agreement was reached early last year and Rock Beyond Belief was slated for April 2011. But Griffith soon canceled it.

"I felt we were not getting all of the support we were promised," Griffith said. "We were not getting an equal level given to Rock the Fort."

Fort Bragg officials say they asked nothing extra of Griffith that they do not ask of anyone seeking to hold an on-base event. Further complicating the process were reports by Fox News that the concert would feature the rock band

Aiden, whose lyrics are perceived by some as anti-Christian.

With funding from several freethought organizations, Rock Beyond Belief was rescheduled. And while dissenting opinions about religion will likely be expressed, Griffith and base officials have agreed the content will be "family friendly."

Still, the concert has its critics. The Associated Gospel Churches, an organization of independent evangelical churches that endorses chaplains for the military, has asked the Department of Defense to step in.

"What we want to see is the Secretary of Defense say enough of this nonsense and shut this thing off," said Chaplain James Poe, president of AGC. "It is not in any way constructive to military discipline. It reeks with rebellion. The Army has had for years a sense of core values and this tears down those values. It is an assault on the things Army people hold most dear and it needs to stop."

But Col. Stephen Sicinski, Fort Bragg's garrison commander, has signed off on the concert and issued a statement, reading in part, "Fort Bragg will not discriminate against speech on the basis of its viewpoint."

No taxpayer money is supporting this event, a base spokesperson said, nor did any public money go toward Rock the Fort -- a claim Griffith and others dispute. The base will provide security, setup, tear-down and cleanup for Rock Beyond Belief, as it did for Rock the Fort.

Griffith would like to stage similar events at other bases, especially those where Christian-themed events have been held with support from military brass. Meanwhile, he hopes Rock the Fort gives unbelievers in the military the courage to come forward and seek tolerance and acceptance.

"At the end of the day we are asking the same questions as the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians," Griffith said. "We just have a different answer."