

Army religious affairs specialist advocates for religious accommodations

By Sgt. 1st Class Joshua Brandenburg March 30, 2024



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In the dynamic and diverse landscape of the U.S. Army, where Soldiers of various backgrounds and beliefs serve together, one religious affairs specialist stands out for his dedication to ensuring that all Soldiers can practice their faith freely. Sgt. Jerrell Ralph's passion for serving extends beyond his military duties to advocating for religious accommodations for his fellow Soldiers.

Ralph, a longtime Rastafarian, understands the challenges Soldiers face in balancing their religious beliefs with the demands of military life. As a devout Rastafarian who was raised in Ethiopian Eastern Orthodox, he has experienced firsthand the importance of being able to practice his faith while serving his country.

"I was raised a church boy; my mom is Orthodox, so we went to church quite a lot," said Ralph, the religious affairs specialist with 303rd Ordinance Battalion, 8th Military Police Brigade, 8th Theater Sustainment Command. "When I got into middle school, I decided to be Rastafarian; it lines up with my values and what I believe in."

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Ralph's Rastafarian beliefs are central to his identity and guide his daily life. This presented a difficult decision when he enlisted in the Army, as he faced challenges in practicing his religion due to the

military's strict grooming and drug policies. Not yet having a religious accommodation and having to cut his dreadlocks for personal reasons as a child, Ralph still had to shave his beard. Finding support in an Old Testament Bible edict that states razors should not touch the head of the faithful, Rastafarians hold their dreadlocks and, for males, beards as a commitment to Jah, also known as God in other religions.

Despite these obstacles and sacrifices, he remained steadfast in his military duties and faith and sought a religious accommodation to serve while adhering to his beliefs.

"Honestly, my process was easier than other Soldier's processes because I had all the documentation and documents to back up what I was saying," said Ralph. "When they're (chaplains) doing the interview process, their main goal is to make sure you are genuine about your religion."

After a chaplain meets with the Soldier and determines they are genuine, the chaplain sends a memo to brigade and division, and depending on what the accommodation entails, the memo could get sent up to the Chief of Chaplains and then to the Secretary of the Army.

According to Ralph, the process generally takes three to four months, depending on the accommodations requested. Since Rastafari is not a common religion in the Army, after a year and a thorough review process that reached the Secretary of the Army, Ralph was granted his religious accommodation.

"The hardest part for me was just waiting," said Ralph.

His accommodation allows him to maintain a beard and wear a turban in uniform; however, he must still adhere to the Army's drug policies.

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"Before my religious accommodation, I had a shaving profile, but I still had to cut it (his beard)," said Ralph. "But now that I have my religious accommodation, I can properly grow it how I want to. With my beard, I feel stronger, wiser ... and that I'm keeping my covenant with Jah."

There are additional limits to his religious accommodation in addition to adhering to Army drug policies, said Ralph.

"So, it (his beard) can grow as long as it can, but at two inches, you have to roll it," said Ralph. "The only religious accommodation that allows large bushy beards is the Rabbis, and I understand that. You have to keep the standards somewhere."

Driven by a deep sense of empathy and a commitment to his fellow Soldiers, Ralph has made it one of his missions to help others navigate the process of requesting religious accommodations. He educates Soldiers about their rights and the procedures involved, offering guidance and support every step of the way, but it is not a guarantee if fellow Soldiers are insincere.

"For me, being the first focal point when it comes to religious accommodations, having an accommodation, it's easier to weed them out; who's sincere and who's not sincere," said Ralph. "Who just wants a beard to look cool in uniform and who needs a beard because that's what fulfills that religious need."

His efforts have helped several Soldiers, including two fellow Rastafarians, one Sikh, and one Muslim, receive accommodations, and he is currently helping more through the process.

"I'm an advocate for all religions," said Ralph. "It's just my job to be an advocate for them."

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One of Ralph's most notable successes was helping a fellow Rastafarian Soldier secure his own religious accommodation. Not knowing each other were Rastafarians, Ralph met Spc. DeAngelo Williams while they were both stationed at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri in 2018, where they quickly struck up a friendship and discovered their shared religion.

"When we met, we didn't realize how much we had in common nor that we were both Rastafarian," said Williams, a human resource specialist with the 231st Military Police Battalion, Alabama National Guard. "We were both trying to figure out how to get religious accommodations."

While going through his own religious accommodation process, Ralph quickly learned that Williams had once submitted for a religious accommodation and was initially denied. Ralph helped Williams, who had already resubmitted, with the process and provided Williams with the necessary information and documentation, eventually receiving William's accommodation.

"My initial accommodation was rejected, and I had already started the process to resubmit when Jerrell started helping me," said Williams. "He was going through the same process but knew how to word certain phrases, what documentation and scripture I needed to get approved."

Ralph's work has not only had a positive impact on individual Soldiers but has also contributed to a greater understanding and acceptance of religious diversity within his unit and, undoubtedly, the Army. His advocacy has helped create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for Soldiers of all faiths, strengthening the bonds of camaraderie and mutual respect that are essential to military service.

"He definitely helped me get my accommodation," said Williams.

As the U.S. Army continues to evolve and adapt to meet the challenges of the modern world, Soldiers like Ralph serve as shining examples of the values that make the Army strong – compassion, integrity, and a commitment to supporting one another.