

Wiccan Controversy Tests Military Religious Tolerance

By Hanna Rosin
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Tuesday, June 8, 1999; Page A1

KILLEEN, Tex.—Every full moon for the past two years, a few dozen off-duty soldiers have gathered at an open campsite at Fort Hood, America's largest military post. By day, they are privates and sergeants in the U.S. Army, training for deployment to Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo. But at these lunar assemblies they trade in their Army fatigues for hooded robes, chant to the lead of their chosen high priestess and dance around a fire well into the night.

They are America's first official Army witches, with all that double duty implies: buzz cuts and pentagram rings, moon tattoos under uniforms. One typical dog tag reads: NAME: Philip Campanaro. UNIT: USAG III Corps. RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE: Wicca.

After two years in peaceful obscurity, the Fort Hood wiccans -- their beliefs a blend of pre-Christian paganism and New Age earth worship -- suddenly find themselves in the midst of a brewing controversy. Last month, a photograph of one of their moonlit rituals made it into the local papers, leading some national Christian leaders and one congressman to begin denouncing their practices as satanic.

Now the witches are forced to confront a question their predecessors faced since the dawn of Christianity: Should they retreat back into secret covens, or try their luck in the open market of America's scattered spirituality? The military, in the meantime, finds itself explaining what until now has been a little known but routine lifestyle policy: supporting soldiers who want to practice what the military calls, without passing judgment, "minority" religions.

Two summers ago, the Army approved the Fort Hood Open Circle as its first official wiccan group. Without much fanfare, Fort Hood officials gave them a grassy campsite for their sacred ground, sanctioned their choice of high priestess -- even lent them an Army chaplain for moral support.

Twice a week, the wiccans hold evening classes on subjects such as lunar cycles and the meaning of a coven. On full moons and eight sacred holidays, they and dozens of more witches from the surrounding area watch the high priestess lift her dagger over a ball of salt and honor the blessed earth. The events are posted on base and open to anyone interested. Except for a handful of letters from irate fundamentalist Christians in nearby Killeen, the rituals attracted little notice until recently.

Then in March, they invited a photographer to witness their spring rite ceremony. Several weeks later, the Austin American-Statesman ran photos of the high priestess and several others leaping over the campfire, the men shirtless, the women in witchy robes. Within days, Christian groups were calling the base and threatening to stage a march in town and disrupt the rituals, forcing the Army to beef up security around the campsite.

Since then, witch skittishness has spread as far as Washington. "Please stop this nonsense now," Rep. Robert L. Barr Jr. (R-Ga.) wrote to Lt. Gen. Leon S. Leonte, the commanding officer of Fort Hood. "What's next? Will armored divisions be forced to travel with sacrificial animals for Satanic rituals? Will Rastafarians demand the inclusion of ritualistic marijuana cigarettes in their rations?"

Barr is threatening hearings and legislation, yet so far the Army brass at Fort Hood is shrugging. In the new equal-opportunity military, where diversity is strength, minority religions are not merely tolerated but welcomed. As long as a group does not interfere with discipline, the military will help it find an off-base leader and a place to practice its beliefs, explained Fort Hood spokesman Lt. Col. Ben Santos.

To date, no other group as off-beat as the wiccans has asked for approval. But the Army's Handbook for Chaplains lists a few of the myriad possibilities open to soldiers: Church of Satan, Black Judaism, Scientology, Temple of Set -- all candidates for potential approval, considered case by case.

Far from clashing cultures, the wiccans and the military coexist cheerfully. To the Army, the wiccans are part of a proud American tradition, proof that "people with different religious beliefs are all working together successfully," said Santos, role models to fractured nations such as Bosnia and Kosovo. To the wiccans, the military is an adopted home, far more tolerant than the narrow, bigoted world outside. "Most people think of [soldiers] as mindless robots who kill babies," said Marcy Palmer, the Fort Hood high priestess. "But we see more discrimination in the civilian world. The military is actually much more sensitive."

The Fort Hood Open Circle was conceived in a practical moment, when a group of wiccans outgrew their living room meeting space. A staff sergeant among them asked the Army for help and looked into the requirements for official recognition. They needed an off-base sponsor and chose the Sacred Well Congregation of San Antonio. They needed a high priestess to lead them and selected Palmer.

For a group out to dispel images of broomsticks and black magic, Palmer proved the perfect choice: A six-year veteran of the military police, Palmer had won a coveted soldier-of-the-year award and now works at the pediatric section of the Army hospital. When she's not in her ritual robe, Palmer favors a Scooby Doo T-shirt and Mickey Mouse watch. Sure, she keeps a pet wolf in her back yard, but he's penned up like a common dog.

Palmer was raised a witch in Seattle, and the lifestyle is as familiar to her as breakfast cereal. Without a written guide like the Bible, the many varieties of wicca follow in common a version of the golden rule: "An ye harm none, do what ye will." Most wiccans worship Mother Earth and Father Sky. And no, they don't sacrifice animals or cast evil spells, she said.

Still, in Palmer's series of interviews with Army chaplains, some thorny subjects came up. For example, most wiccans prefer to conduct their rituals "skyclad" -- their poetic word for naked. And naked is not allowed on the base. Army policy won on this score.

Then there were the athames, those nine-inch daggers used at the high altar on sabbats. On those the chaplains compromised. As long as they were not used to cut anything, the Army would allow their use in ceremonies.

A few more rules: Pentagrams were okay, as long as they were unobtrusive -- one small ring, or a necklace worn inside the uniform. No candles in the barracks, and avoid tattoos.

With conduct guidelines established and the campsite picked out, the witches of Fort Hood came out of hiding.

Before that joyous summer, Sgt. Campanaro, 34, had kept his pentagrams to himself; he spotted fellow witches by "reading the energy I picked up from their aura," he said.

The campsite has changed his tiptoeing habits. "I keep meeting people I never knew were wiccans," he said. "I've never seen so many out in one place."

A typical Monday or Wednesday night meeting draws all manner of witches, from experts to dabblers. A few young privates just back from Bosnia bore the mark of MTV-overload witches, with fist-sized red devils tattooed on their biceps. The expert witches are barely detectable, except, perhaps, by a small pentagram tucked under their shirt.

At the twice-a-week classes, they work through the difficulties of life as an Army witch. Wiccans, to give one glaring example, are pacifists. Yet many of them fought in the Gulf War and are likely to be shipped to war zones again.

David Oringsderff, a 30-year Army veteran and founder of Sacred Well, the Open Circle's sponsoring congregation, tried to explain the contradiction. Christians, he pointed out, also believe thou shalt not kill. In his view, the wiccans are at least more honest: They believe everything they do comes back at them threefold, so they prepare to pay a price. "We accept responsibility for our actions and don't have the devil to blame things on," Oringsderff said. Wiccan soldiers may kill in the line of duty "but with no malice in our hearts and no pleasure in the act."

Such descriptions of peace-loving wiccans rankle some local Christians. "Everyone thinks they're such sweet, lovely people," said the Rev. Jack Harvey, who runs the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Killeen. But Harvey, who prides himself on his church's strictness -- no dancing or drinking, no Halloween or Santa Claus or Easter Bunny -- knows better. He has compiled a hand-scrawled list of relevant Scripture entitled "Witchcraft is Wicked."

"God says, 'Suffer not a witch to live,' " he said. "We would like to see them saved, but God doesn't change his mind." Over the summer, Harvey is writing letters, planning protests, calling every member of Congress he knows. "We need to stop them," he said. "We're not going to quit until they're gone."

What's at stake for Harvey and his followers is nothing short of the nation's future. If the military goes, what's left?

John Walton, a member of Harvey's church, worked as a chaplain at Fort Hood for 5 1/2 years. He entered the chaplain corps with dreams of joining the line of uniformed prophets who had ministered to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. But a few classes of sensitivity training at Army Chaplain School in New Jersey put his chosen career in perspective.

The guiding principle taught at the school was Offend No One, Walton explained. Chaplains were trained to minister to any soldier who came seeking help no matter what their religion, and told never to criticize. For Walton, the job description might as well have been "glorified social worker."

When he graduated, Walton was told to keep the name Jesus out of his sermons, to stick to God instead. When he refused, his name was removed from a roster of preachers for Sunday service.

When the Army sanctioned the Fort Hood Open Circle, Walton gave up: In January, he quit the chaplain corps. Now he roams the country with his wife and children looking for a church that will have him as preacher.

Walton's righteous Christian chaplains are long gone, and the military's new democracy of religion is already deeply entrenched. In the two years since Fort Hood approved wiccans, open circles have popped up at other military bases: Fort Polk in Louisiana, Fort Wainwright in Alaska, Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa and Fort Barrancas in Florida. A high priestess was just approved in Germany, and another has applied on the Kosovo mission.

"We are at the end of one age and the beginning of another," said Palmer at a Wednesday class. "Our time has finally come."

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