

Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers



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FIGHTING FOR THE FREEDOMS WE DEFEND

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Council Members and Citizens
City of Lake Elsinore

Subject: A Sectarian Memorial/Monument Dishonors Many Veterans

I am writing on behalf of military men and women who have served our country in all branches of service and all conflicts of our nation, and I ask that you ensure no religious symbolism or sectarian bias be included in the proposed or future monuments approved by City Council.

The Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers represents nontheists who have served the United States throughout history up to the present conflicts. Those who represent our service include Pat Tillman, Afghanistan war Army Ranger and football player, Hans Kasten, WWII POW leader, Kurt Vonnegut, WWII POW and author, Ted Williams, WWII Veteran and baseball player, Sherwin Wine, Founder of Humanistic Judaism, and Robert Ingersoll, who raised a Regiment in the Civil War. Over 200 current and prior military personnel from all branches of service have posted public "atheists in foxholes" profiles on our site, and our total membership spreads over more than 400 military installations and ships worldwide.

We are Marines and Soldiers and Airmen and Sailors. We are combat veterans. Our members also include World War II veterans, though fewer than in years past. I am a West Point graduate and Iraq veteran. Why should our service be marginalized by the Council? Are a flag and eagle not enough? Why must a divisive and religious symbol mar an otherwise noble effort to honor veterans?

To place a cross or other religious symbol on a memorial for veterans is a slap in the face to our service. Such an act by the City of Lake Elsinore gives official sanction to Christianity over all other beliefs. Adding a Star of David would serve only to patronize Jewish personnel and to further emphasize that worship of a monotheistic God is "approved" for citizens and that all others are second-class. The suggestion that the WWII soldier justifies Christian and Jewish symbolism suggests the council would like to return to a time when our forces were segregated by race and when Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists were afforded no accommodation whatsoever. The Pledge of Allegiance did not include the phrase "Under God" and our motto was not "In God We Trust". Would the Council dare to offend monument supporters by putting the Pledge on the monument less "Under God" with the excuse that it was authentic to the period? That would be true to history but it would infuriate those trying to promote their beliefs. Atheists, humanists, and other non-Christians serve their country and give the ultimate sacrifice with no less dignity than believers. The only option for the council is to honor all service equally, with American rather than sectarian imagery and values.

Citizens and council members of Lake Elsinore should not be fooled into thinking this is a simple question of supporting veterans. Throughout the country in North Carolina, Montana, Maryland, and several California locations, Christians are attempting to defend crosses and shrines on government land

as a way to promote their religion. Jewish individuals and organizations are occasionally complicit in the relatively recent political mechanisms of "Judeo-Christian values". The Constitution our military men and women have sworn to defend prohibits such an establishment of religion in government. Lake Elsinore is the newest government body being exploited to expand Christian privilege in government. This Christianization of our war memorials is an issue of stolen valor as stark as any false claim of military awards.

"This is not a religious issue, this is an accurate historical depiction of a World War II soldier," [Councilwoman] Melendez was quoted as saying. "We are not making a religious statement; that's not what this is about." It would be so much easier to simply remove the unnecessary symbolism. If this is not about religion, then a cross (and star) should not be on the monument. If Christians wish to honor service members in general or to honor just Christian service members, then they should do so on their personal or church property. MAAF would applaud such a monument because we affirm religious freedom and support for veterans. But this monument on city land with city approval is nothing more than government establishment of religion.

MAAF is not representing a legal action with this letter, but the briefest review of case history will show sectarian symbols in or as memorials are being challenged throughout the country. The Lake Elsinore Council will be wrong, legally and ethically, if they erect a sectarian shrine under the guise of a war memorial. The City Council will expose taxpayer dollars to legal fees and expose itself to ridicule for self-serving governance. Conservative and Christian veterans may advocate for a Christian memorial and viscerally denounce the voices of reason who point to the Constitution and the diversity of our military. Council members should remember that they have been put in this difficult and actionable position by Christian special interests. The hard and honorable fight is one that resists special interests in the service of diversity and equality for the marginalized minority of non-Christians service members who deserve equal recognition.

Take time to watch the PBS documentary *Berga*. Watch the story of Hans Kasten, foxhole atheist and just a Private at the time, who was elected by his peers to lead other Prisoners of War. He stood up to his Nazi captors by refusing to give up Jewish prisoners. He was beaten but still refused to betray his fellow soldiers, whatever their beliefs. He was a member of MAAF and travelled to Washington, DC in 2005 to address gathered veterans about his values and how important it was to have recognition of our service. He talked about how important it was for our military to move beyond assumed Christian monoculture and to embrace diversity. Our Freedom has been defended by Christians and Jews, Wiccans and Buddhists, Blacks and Whites, Men and Women... and atheists. Honor military service by honoring all veterans, not just those who happen to share the beliefs of the majority.

Prove that this memorial isn't about religion. Don't be strong-armed by special interests. Make the legal choice that honors all our veterans. It's a simple change that will still make for a wonderful monument:

Appropriate for Church



Appropriate for Government



Throwing in a Star of David
Does not fix the issue.

Jason Torpy
President, Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers

References:

Similar religious veterans memorials: <http://militaryatheists.org/advocacy/stolen-valor/>

Profiles of atheists in foxholes: <http://militaryatheists.org/atheists-in-foxholes/>

Less than 70% of our military self-identifies as Christian: <http://militaryatheists.org/demographics/>