

Statement for the Record from Major Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi
House Armed Services Committee
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
U.S. House of Representatives
Hearing on Religious Accommodations in the Armed Services
January 29, 2014

My name is Major Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi. I am grateful for the opportunity to submit this statement and respectfully request its inclusion in the official hearing record. In 2009, the U.S. Army made history by granting me an accommodation to maintain my religiously-mandated turban, unshorn hair, and beard while serving as a proud American Soldier. I am enclosing my written statement from a May 2013 hearing organized by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, where I discussed my successful deployment to Afghanistan; the successful accommodations and achievements of fellow Sikh American Soldiers Captain Tejdeep Singh Rattan and Corporal Simran Preet Singh Lamba; and our collective efforts to overcome the presumptive ban on Sikh articles of faith in the U.S. military.

On January 22, 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense issued revisions to Instruction Number 1300.17 (*Accommodation of Religious Practices Within the Military Services*). Although the revisions are a step in the right direction for recognizing the importance of religious liberty to our nation's Soldiers, the Instruction still retains a presumptive ban on Sikh articles of faith in the U.S. military and may therefore have a chilling effect on religious liberty for aspiring Sikh American Soldiers.

I hope that the Instruction is fine-tuned and implemented in ways that give Sikh Americans a fair chance to serve in the U.S. military. Sikhs are not asking for a blank check, but we believe the Instruction can be significantly improved in ways that respect both military necessity and religious liberty. My Sikh articles of faith did not prevent me from excelling as an American Soldier. If a Sikh American Soldier can graduate from boot camp; comply with requirements relating to helmets and protective masks; and promote unit cohesion by performing military duties with excellence, we should not force that American Soldier to choose between religious liberty and a military career. Thank you for your consideration.



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
WOMACK ARMY MEDICAL CENTER
FORT BRAGG, NORTH CAROLINA 28310

REPLY TO
ATTENTION OF

31 May 2013

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

SUBJECT: Personal Statement¹ Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights

I am thankful to the United States Commission on Civil Rights for providing me this opportunity to appear before you today.

I also applaud the Commission for seeking to protect the civil rights of those who like me proudly serve and have served the military of our great country.

My name is Major Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi. I was born into a family with three generations of military service before me and raised to cherish loyalty, duty, respect, service, honor, integrity and courage as a citizen in the United States of America. I began my career in the U.S. Army as a First Lieutenant in 2001, and continue to serve with tremendous pride. I am presently on active duty as the Emergency Medical Services Director at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. After two deployments, I am also the grateful recipient of the Bronze Star Medal for my service in Afghanistan.

While my experiences as a service member are among the most exhilarating and memorable experiences of my life, my journey to service had its share of challenges.

In 2009, the United States Army made history by granting me and another Sikh American soldier, Captain Tejdeep Singh Rattan, an accommodation to maintain our religiously-mandated turbans, unshorn hair, and beards while serving the country we love. It was the first-time in over a generation that a new Sikh American soldier had been granted such an accommodation.

¹ The views expressed herein represent only my personal view and not the views of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Army or Womack Army Medical Center. I am the point of contact for this memorandum.

At first, I was told that I could not serve my country unless I gave up my Sikh articles of faith pursuant to a US military policy that existed since 1981. Led by the Sikh Coalition, it took over 15,000 Americans to petition the Army and support from over 50 Members of Congress before my request for accommodation was granted.

Thankfully and wisely, our military looked to the military of our allies in Great Britain, Canada, and India, who all accommodate Sikh soldiers, for guidance. The military also reviewed the previous history of Sikh service in our military. Since the early 1900's, Sikhs have served honorably and with distinction in the U.S. military. In fact, more than 80,000 Sikh soldiers died fighting alongside allied forces during the World Wars before we reversed course as a country and closed the door on Sikh American service in 1981.

Army officials asked smart and pragmatic questions about the Sikh faith. They learned that Sikhs have a glorious and storied tradition of military service throughout the world that is tied uniquely to our articles of faith. They also learned that Sikh soldiers can wear helmets and make airtight seals with gas masks.

In short, as we all expect since its mission is so sacred, our military did their homework. As result in 2009, while our military did not open its doors to all patriotic Sikhs, it at least opened its doors to me and Captain Rattan, allowing us to maintain our Sikh articles of faith while serving the country we love.

I would humbly say that it was the right decision and I believe my fellow soldiers, as detailed in the over a dozen attached letters of support, would agree.

On my first day of active duty at Officer Basic Training in July 2010, the Sergeant Major assembled us in formation, pulled me out to stand beside him facing my fellow soldiers and told us that the Army comes in "many shades of green." He then asked if there was a single soldier amongst the hundreds that were there who did not feel the same way. This was the first real test of unit cohesion or *esprit de corps* that I had encountered. Everyone applauded in support.

After training, I deployed to Afghanistan in January 2011 as the Officer-in-Chief of a tented Emergency Room in Helmand province. I also served as the Chief of Disaster Medicine for our entire Forward Operating Base.

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During my tour in Afghanistan, I personally treated over 750 combat casualties and local nationals who suffered from IED blasts, gunshot wounds, and other emergent conditions. I also successfully resuscitated back to life two patients that were clinically dead on arrival, but I remember one particular soldier whose story I would like to share with you.

Let's call him Joe. Our medics radio in that they are bringing in a Marine from an IED blast just outside our main gate. The insurgents had taken advantage of a recent dust storm to bury IEDs all around us. They rushed him into our Emergency Room tent. He was breathing, but was bleeding badly from multiple shrapnel wounds. He was dazed but was able to converse. We worked on him for the next two hours, ordering tests, removing shrapnel, suturing wounds, and stabilizing his vitals. When he was ready for transfer to the admitting wards, our medics began wheeling him away. Joe grabbed my hand with tears in his eyes and said "Thank you brother." That is one of many moments during my service in Afghanistan that I will never forget.

I can tell you with 100% assurance that none of my fellow soldiers or patients could care less that I was wearing a turban or had a beard while I was treating their wounds. All that mattered was whether I was an asset to our mission. Based on my Bronze Star Medal citation which commends my "leadership and dedication to duty" as being "instrumental to the unit's mission during combat operations," I would humbly submit that I was, in fact an asset to our mission.

Like me, Captain Rattan also served in Afghanistan. He received an Army Commendation Medal and a NATO Medal for his service. And in 2010, the US Army agreed to individually accommodate an enlisted Sikh soldier, Specialist Simran Preet Singh Lamba. Together the three of us are the only new Sikh Americans that our military has agreed to accommodate in a generation.

Both Captain Rattan and Specialist Lamba would agree with me that our Sikh articles of faith not only do not interfere with our duties, but are in fact an invaluable asset to our military because their accommodation projects our country's values of freedom and pluralism to the world.

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I have been on active duty at Fort Bragg since September 2010. I am currently the Medical Director for the Department of Defense's largest stateside Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system, comprised of over 500 first responders, EMS, police, fire and dispatch agencies. While I'm a bit bashful with making this public, my latest Officer's Evaluation Report states that I have displayed:

“Truly exceptional performance from a tireless Emergency Medicine Physician, scholar, mentor and soldier. MAJ Kalsi works tirelessly to promote academic and clinical excellence. He has been published in premier literature and has lectured at national level conferences. His leadership as Chief of the busiest Ambulance Service in the DoD has been phenomenal, and led to dramatic improvements in the quality and standardization of prehospital care across DoD's largest troop concentration.”

While I am grateful for these generous words and even more grateful for the opportunity to serve, it troubles me that my accommodation and that of other Sikh soldiers are simply individual accommodations.

Despite the successful and patriotic service of myself, Captain Rattan, and Specialist Lamba, the rule remains that Sikh Americans cannot serve our military without giving up their articles of faith. I would add here that even the accommodations Captain Rattan, Specialist Lamba, and I have received are not permanent. Despite our service and loyalty, we must reapply for an accommodation every time we are assigned to a new unit or base.

The time has come and passed for our military to openly embrace those Sikhs who want to serve our country by removing the rules that presumptively exclude them.

By making this call to end the presumptive ban on Sikh military service, let me make clear that I would never advocate for anything that would put my fellow soldiers in harm's way. If Sikhs could not wear helmets or gas masks when required, I would never call on my military to accommodate Sikh American soldiers. But that is simply not the case. Sikh soldiers have served on special forces teams. They have jumped out of airplanes as paratroopers, and have deployed in far forward combat operations. We can serve our country and be Sikh at the same time.

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To my military, I would say that your prospective Sikh American soldiers are waiting to be embraced by you. We are mindful that our military now fully allows LGBT soldiers to serve, and is beginning to allow female soldiers to serve in forward combat positions – and that the sky has not fallen because of it. In fact, the opposite is happening. We are increasing the pool of Americans willing serve our country, we are advancing our strategic missions, and we are staying to true to the core American principle that it matters not who you are, but what you do.

In closing I would like to quote from a letter that America's First General, General George Washington, wrote to a Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1791. President Washington wrote that America:

“[G]ives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.”

Patriotic Sikh Americans are ready to give America its “effectual support.” I humbly plead for our military to accept it.

Thank you.

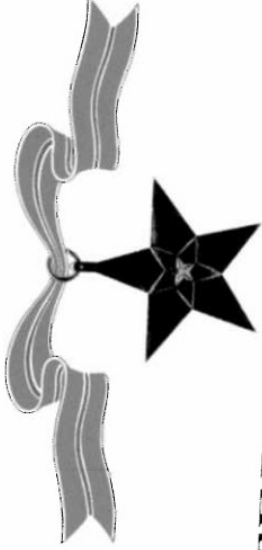
Encl: A1 – A21

Respectfully,



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THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, GREETING: THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AUTHORIZED BY EXECUTIVE ORDER, 24 AUGUST 1962 HAS AWARDED

THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL

TO

CAPTAIN KAMAJEET S. KALSI

BRAVO COMPANY, 115 COMBAT SUPPORT HOSPITAL

FOR

EXCEPTIONALLY MERITORIOUS SERVICE AS AN EMERGENCY MEDICINE PHYSICIAN WHILE DEPLOYED IN SUPPORT OF OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM. HIS LEADERSHIP AND DEDICATION TO DUTY WERE INSTRUMENTAL TO THE UNIT'S MISSION DURING COMBAT OPERATIONS. CAPTAIN KALSI'S DISTINCTIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS REFLECT GREAT CREDIT UPON HIMSELF, TASK FORCE 44 MEDICAL, AND THE UNITED STATES ARMY.

FROM 4 JANUARY 2011 TO 17 JULY 2011
GIVEN UNDER MY HAND IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON
THIS 7TH DAY OF AUGUST 2011

TIMOTHY P. MCHALE
Major General, United States Army
Deputy Commander, Support
United States Forces-Afghanistan
Permanent Order # 219-003



SECRETARY OF THE ARMY