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Muslim Ex-Chaplain Wants U.S. to Apologize

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James Yee played by the rules.

He made the honor roll in high school in his suburban hometown of Springfield and became captain of the wrestling team. He went on to West Point, and joined the U.S. Army, following the example set by his father, a World War II veteran.

The grandson of Chinese immigrants, he dreamed of making his mark in the country that had given his ancestors a second chance.

When he got assigned to be a Muslim chaplain at the U.S. base at Guantanamo, Cuba, where detainees suspected of having al-Qaida or Taliban ties were being held, he thought his dream would come true.

"I thought I'd become the highest ranking Muslim chaplain in the armed services," said Yee, who converted to Islam after curiosity about the religion led him to read several books about it. "I felt I was close to becoming a lieutenant colonel. I'd just gotten the best job evaluation I'd gotten in my career."

Yee did make his mark – but in a way he never imagined. He was arrested and condemned in 2003 as a "spy" aiding the prisoners at Guantanamo. He spent 76 days in solitary confinement after the spy charges. His image was splashed across newspapers, magazines and television screens around the world.

Now, two years after all the charges were dropped and he resigned -- with an honorable discharge -- from the military, Yee still feels the sting of his ordeal. He has written a book about it, "For God and Country," and will be returning to his native state on Feb. 16 to talk about it in Ridgewood.

Life took a bad turn for Yee when federal agents approached him as he was leaving the base in September 2003 to go to Olympia, Wash., to meet his wife, Huda, and daughter. Authorities concluded that a list of phone numbers and other papers Yee was holding with information about Syria -- where his wife and daughter were visiting -- were classified.

They took Yee to a Navy brig in South Carolina where other notorious post-Sept. 11 detainees, such as U.S.-born Saudi Yaser Esam Hamdi, and U.S. citizen Jose Padilla -- charged with planning to detonate a "dirty bomb" -- have been held.

"It's changed the whole course of life," Yee, 37, said from Washington State, where he now lives with his wife and 6-year-old daughter. "It made me much more aware of politics, civil liberty issues and national security issues."

It was not that he was about such things before 2003.

"Clearly after Sept. 11, every American Muslim has experienced the backlash of profiling," Yee said. "If I was at all, it was perhaps in thinking that I couldn't be locked up and thrown in jail, and threatened with the death penalty. Even after I was arrested, I thought it was all so absurd that people would come to their senses -- within hours. It didn't happen."

U.S. investigators shifted their attention to Yee's work in the prison library. They believed Yee and other Muslims at the base were using the library as a base through which to pass messages among detainees. They also believed Yee was guiding detainees on how to undermine questioning by U.S. investigators. But all the materials and leads they collected failed to amount to much, and the espionage case collapsed.

Critics, including many newspaper editorial boards across the country, said the military's pursuit of Yee was nothing more than a single-minded witch hunt in a climate of post-Sept. 11 suspicions of Muslims.

Throughout this, tellingly, Yee received honors from the military, including a medal for excellent service after he resigned.

His parents, who still live in a modest split-level in Springfield, said they always knew the charges would be dropped.

"It was the worst thing I've ever been through," said his mother, Fong Yee.

"As a mother, it tore my heart out to turn on the television, and see my son's face, with all those awful headlines about spying," she said.

Yee was recruited for Guantanamo to help ease tensions between U.S. soldiers and the Muslim detainees. He set out to carry out that mission, he said, by voicing the needs and concerns of the detainees. He made sure they could say their prayers, that they were given foods allowed by Islam and that they knew which way to face Mecca. He also spoke up when he saw mistreatment, he says in his book.

It is the fact that he took his job so seriously, he believes, and became a formidable advocate for the detainees, that the military brass grew leery of him at a time when nerves were especially jittery about national security threats.

"Maybe I was considered a traitor because I was not afraid to tell my commanders that many of the things we were doing at Guantanamo were wrong," Yee wrote. "Maybe it was because I was not willing to silently stand by and watch U.S. soldiers abuse the Quran, mock people's religion and strip men of their dignity -- even if those men were prisoners."

His parents took James' ordeal as their cause.

Yee's father appealed to Jon Corzine, then a U.S. senator, who wrote a letter to the military, saying: "I hope that, as you consider Captain Yee's appeal, you will avoid any decision that might appear to stem from the sensational but erroneous initial allegations against Captain Yee, and that you will dismiss all charges against him."

Now, Yee views the nightmare philosophically.

"Islam views the good and the bad things that happen to you as a test" for the next life, he said in the interview.

"You don't say 'Why me?' You know that it's a test, and God wants to see how you handle it," he said.

Still, Yee and his parents wish the government would apologize.

"An apology," Yee wrote, "would make us feel confident that our military -- the tool with which we defend and encourage American values of justice, equality, tolerance and diversity -- truly upholds and defends these principles itself."

Yee will speak about his book and his experience at the Ridgewood Public Library on North Maple Avenue at 7 p.m. Feb. 16.