

GENERAL'S FIRING SPARKS DEBATE

Students of military ethics say a higher moral code is required of officers; others charge a double standard.

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By Susan Greene

Last summer, while waiting for Congress to approve his third general's star, Thomas Griffith said he never figured he'd make it that far.

"For a guy who thought he was going to retire as a lieutenant colonel, I'm pretty thrilled," said the Nellis Air Force Base commander last July before heading to Tucson's Davis Monthan Air Force Base to command the 12th Air Force and the U.S. Southern Command Air Forces.

One year later, the thrill for Griffith is gone.

In a rare public announcement Monday, Air Force brass cited "inappropriate personal conduct" as cause for relieving the lieutenant general, a 28 year service veteran, of his duties commanding 43,000 personnel and 530 planes in the West, Midwest and Latin America.

Neither Pentagon nor Nellis spokes men would elaborate on the allegations, but Air Force sources corroborated news media reports that Griffith was fired for cheating on his wife.

Griffith--who commanded Nellis' Weapons and Tactics Center from 1992 to 1994--was not in his office last week and did not return phone calls. His case is being investigated by the Air Force inspector general.

Four years after the Navy's Tailhook scandal and three years after presidential candidate Bill Clinton, now commander in chief acknowledged a "friendly acquaintance" with Gennifer Flowers, Griffith's dismissal triggers questions about whether military leaders should be held to higher personal standards than other professionals. Some observers say the military must impose higher standards to win wars, while others see policing personal lives as a means of achieving more political goals.

Officers in the Air Force and other military branches are subject to the laws of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which lists adultery as a legal transgression on grounds that it prejudices "good order and discipline" and "bring(s) discredit upon the armed forces." Maximum punishment is dishonorable discharge and confinement for one year.

It is unclear whether Griffith will retire or face a court-

martial.

News of his dismissal has surprised Nellis personnel and members of Las Vegas' retired Air Force community, many of whom worked or socialized with Griffith during his tenure here.

"You don't expect this to happen to a three-star general," said Realtor and retired Air Force Col. Pete Peterson, secretary of the Nevada's Air Force Association chapter.

Peterson said the code serves a practical function in the military -- to uphold trust among comrades in and out of combat.

"When you're flying or fighting next to somebody and it's a matter of life and death, you've got to be able to trust him and his word. Breaking marriage vows violates that integrity. It goes against the trust you need to uphold," he said.

Navy Cmdr. Ronald Smith is writing a thesis on ethics for military officers as part of his master's degree at the Institute for Ethics and Policy Study at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

"None of us are saints," he said. "But our work is different from other professions in that if you're going to lead a battle, you have to be as morally correct as possible. You can't put young people's lives on the line unless you're on stable moral ground."

Smith's professor, the institute's Director Craig Walton, said standards upheld by the code serve as a vital link in the military's chain of command.

"These generals don't have authority just because they have stars on their shoulders. They have it because of merit," said the former Air Force navigator. "If you want to be a real moral sleazeball, then don't become a military officer."

Others, however, see demanding particularly upstanding personal conduct among service members as a double standard.

University of Nevada, Reno Professor Barbara Thornton specializes in professional ethics and sits on the board of directors at the Hastings Center for the Study of Ethics in New York. Having worked with the Defense Department in drafting ethics codes, she says there's nothing peculiar about the military that would require higher personal standards than in civilian life.

"In an ideal world, I would argue that nobody should cheat on their wife or husband. But those aren't the standards in normal society and we can't fairly expect to impose special standards in the military," she said, citing the arrest in Los Angeles last week of actor Hugh Grant, who was caught with a prostitute. "In a society that's confused like ours, it doesn't seem fair to single out one individual."

Thornton said Griffith's dismissal violates one of the major principles in justice--enforcing all standards equally among all people. Ethics should not be enforced selectively, she says, nor should they result in a witch hunt.

"The military apparently didn't think those principles applied to the men involved in Tailhook," Thornton said of the Navy's sexual harassment scandal stemming from a 1991 convention at the Las Vegas Hilton. "One would want to know whether (Griffith) is the only man in such a position who has committed adultery. Unfortunately, these situations can get very political."

Some see Griffith's case as an: example of the military overstepping its boundaries, and possibly an excuse for firing him for other reasons.

"It's just like these guys to interfere in someone's personal life," said Grace Bukowski, a Reno-based activist with the Rural Alliance for Military Accountability, a nonprofit military watchdog group. "I'm sure that if the military kicked out every man who ever cheated on his wife, then they wouldn't have very many people in uniform. ... It makes you wonder what's really going on, why they really let him go."

Griffith's dismissal came just days after a safety official claimed that top Air Force commanders tried to cover up embarrassing performances by flight crews involved in more than two dozen plane crashes. Griffith was to have had the final say in sentencing a colonel reprimanded for perhaps the most widely publicized of those incidents--a B-52 crash last year near Spokane, Wash.

Said Peterson: "If there's some cover-up going on in that way, in my mind it would be a good time to put Griffith on notice."

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