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Admiral At Center Of Inquiry Is Censured By Navy

By C. J. Chivers and Thom Shanker

The Navy on Monday officially disciplined the admiral who had commanded a carrier strike group until being abruptly removed from the position last fall while the vessels patrolled the North Arabian Sea.

Rear Adm. Charles M. Gaouette, who led Carrier Strike Group Three, which included the U.S.S. John C. Stennis, had been accused of using profanity in a public setting and making at least two racially insensitive comments, officials familiar with the investigation said.

He was cleared of any criminal violations under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the laws governing the behavior of armed services personnel. But a set of administrative penalties will effectively end his career.

The Gaouette case arrived as a worrisomely large number of senior military officers have been investigated or fired for poor judgment, malfeasance, sexual improprieties or sexual violence over the last year.

Concern over the number of high-profile cases across the armed services is so acute that Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel on Tuesday sent an unusual letter to the Pentagon's top leadership urging a renewed "commitment to values-based ethical conduct."

"Each of us must rededicate ourselves to upholding the principles of sound leadership," Mr. Hagel wrote in the internal memorandum, a copy of which was provided to The New York Times by a senior official. "Our culture must exemplify both professional excellence and ethical judgment."

Admiral Gaouette was the subject of a five-month investigation by the Naval Inspector General, which had been closely watched within the Navy, partly because of unease among officers about the unusual origins of the case and its potential for embarrassment to the service.

Several officers said the complaint had been filed by Captain Ronald Reis, the commander of the Stennis, after the admiral admonished the captain for his ship-driving practices.

Captain Reis, the officers said, had been an exceptional EA-6 pilot before commanding the carrier, and was highly regarded for his intellect and drive.

But he did not follow normal protocols for driving the ship through busy shipping lanes, and ran a bridge in which the surface officers under his command felt tense and unable to offer their input, the officers said.

Three officers and two former officers familiar with the ship's bridge procedures said the captain tended to act alone and by eye, and not carefully track the Stennis's position relative to other vessels in crowded seas; one of them said he tended "to fly the ship."

After Admiral Gaouette had ordered the captain to slow down as the vessel was steaming through ship traffic in the Malacca Strait in excess of 20 knots, the officers said, Captain Reis filed a complaint to the inspector general, claiming the admiral was abusive.

Reached by e-mail on the Stennis on Tuesday, Captain Reis declined to comment. Admiral Gaouette also declined to comment on details of the case, but released a statement acknowledging mistakes.

“I fully accept responsibility and accountability for my actions while in command,” he wrote, “and deeply regret that my missteps have placed the Navy in this position.”

One former officer who served with both men on the Stennis said that the admiral had acted on a well-documented problem, and then his own missteps became the Navy’s focus.

“We’re not talking about how Ron worked with the harbor pilot when docking at a pier,” the former officer said. “We’re talking about how he was driving through congested seas. People were concerned when he was driving because they were concerned he would hit something.”

He added: “Gaouette’s concern with Ron’s driving was not some power trip or irrational thing.”

After Captain Reis filed the complaint, investigators were flown to the Stennis as it sailed off the coast of Pakistan, flying its aircraft in support of the Afghan war. The ship remains at sea; it is due back to its home port in Bremerton, Wash., this spring.

The investigation ultimately found that the admiral had used profanity while being the subject of a shipboard roast, called a “Foc’sle Follies,” and had made racially insensitive remarks on two previous occasions, officials said.

He received a “nonpunitive letter of caution” and the full inspector-general’s report was ordered to be attached to the admiral’s service record, where it will block his chances at promotion or future command, officials said.

The officials noted that the results of the nonjudicial punishment hearing, or Admiral’s Mast, which was held on Monday in Washington, will now be reviewed up the chain of command, and more serious administrative measures against Admiral Gaouette could still be ordered.

One Navy official familiar with the case also noted that “being cleared of charges doesn’t mean he’s exonerated. And it certainly doesn’t mean his conduct was found to be in keeping with that expected of a strike group commander.”

Because the case is not fully concluded, Navy officials declined to provide details, or discuss precisely what Admiral Gaouette said that Captain Reis and the inspector general deemed insensitive.

“Inasmuch as an administrative review of this case is ongoing, I am unable to comment on any details,” said Rear Admiral John Kirby, the Navy’s top spokesman.

Of all the services, the Navy has been the most aggressive in holding its commanders to strict standards of professional conduct. According to statistics gathered by The Navy Times newspaper, more than 20 Navy commanding officers were fired in 2012 for inappropriate behavior and misconduct; another six commanding officers have been relieved of duty so far this year.

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