Heated Facebook Comments Lands Coast Guardsman in Hot Water

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

The off-hand comments of an enlisted Coast Guardsman on a public Facebook page about Kodiak have landed him in hot water with his superiors at Coast Guard Base Kodiak. In a post on Friends of Kodiak regarding Native land access restrictions Petty Officer Brandon Upchurch made derogatory comments toward Alaska Natives and claimed he accesses Native land despite it being private property.

KMXT’s Jay Barrett has more, and we want to caution you, some of the comments Upchurch made will be offensive to some.

The Facebook page “Friends of Kodiak” offers a forum for residents to ask questions and share information. Everything from where to buy Girl Scout cookies to updates on road conditions can be found there. The administrator of the page, Jeri Mainero, has behavior guidelines pinned to the top of the page saying two things are not allowed: “No ‘bashing’ of anyone;” and cursing should be kept to a minimum.

And while the second of those minimal rules was followed by Coast Guard Petty Officer Brandon Upchurch in comments he made on Wednesday, the first most decidedly was not. Here are his written comments, which as we said, might be offensive to some.

Quote:
“Hell, I will still go out there to camp and have fires. Have you ever been where these damn Natives live? They live like a bunch of bums with trash everywhere. You think that the billions they get from the U.S. Government, they would live like kings. So every one of them can kiss my ass.” Unquote.

Until recently, Upchurch was stationed aboard the Kodiak-based Cutter Munro. According to Chief Petty Officer Sara Moores, he was transferred to a shore-side position prior to the Facebook incident.

“We require all of our members to adhere to the coast Guard values of honor, respect and devotion to duty, whether they’re on-duty, off-duty, out in public, talking online or in the execution of their duties," said Moores. "As such, this member didn’t follow those guidelines, and we understand a number of people within the community found those comments rather tasteless.”

In response to Upchurch’s remarks, the commander of Coast Guard Base Kodiak, Captain Jerald Woloszynski, issued a formal apology, which was also posted on Facebook. In the letter he writes that Upchurch’s command has been notified and will decide how to deal with him. Moores said the Captain wanted to

reassure the community that Upchurch’s comments did not reflect those of the base as a whole.

“The Coast Guard holds all our members accountable," Moores said. "Making inappropriate comments isn’t tolerated, especially when they have the potential to offend various groups throughout the community.”

Moores says Upchurch’s commanding officer is taking the incident seriously and investigating the comments. She says there are several different outcomes.

“The command can consider entering remarks in the member’s personal data record, or an evaluation to document issues related to performance. Any measures taken through this process are confidential and not releasable to the public," she said. "If they take it further than that, into the military justice process, the first step in that process is when charges will be preferred against a military member following an investigation. And these processes closely parallel the civilian process.”

Many other people, seemingly all civilians, also vented and shared opinions, derogatory and otherwise, about Kodiak Native groups for closing their private land to public use. Moores says the Coast Guard’s code of conduct is the difference between Upchurch’s comments and a civilian saying the same thing in a public forum.

“Everyone has opinions, but the vast majority of them don’t belong on Facebook. We encourage all our members through our Coast Guard social media policy and through a variety of different training to interact in a positive and respectful manner in public and in their daily life, whether they’re on or off duty," Moores said. "Certainly we don’t want to offend anyone and we certainly don’t want to make any kind of statements about any particular groups.”

Moores says Captain Woloszynski’s apology on Facebook has been well-received by many outside the Coast Guard:

“The Coast Guard enjoys an excellent relationship with the community here in Kodiak, and we value those partnerships. A lot of people who have been stationed here, choose to remain here after their careers because it is such a wonderful place to live and work," she said. "And we really appreciate the support that was obvious from the community in the comments on that letter that was posted to Friends of Kodiak, of people valuing the Coast Guarding and the continued partnerships that we have.”

KMXT has been unable to reach Petty Officer Brandon Upchurch for comment, and his Facebook profile is no longer accessible. Before his current shore-side assignment and time aboard the cutter Munro, Upchurch served on the Cutter Sequoia. The USO in Guam honored him as its Coast Guardsman of the year in 2011.

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