

**Statement of Eric Jackson to the Religious Liberty Commission**  
**Religious Liberty in the Military**

My name is Eric Jackson. I was a Boatswain Mate First Class with a ranking of E-6 in the United States Coast Guard for 20 years. I have been a Federal Boarding Officer for 16 years, Search and Rescue, Tactical, and Pursuit Coxswain, and Team lead for my boat crew at a Maritime Safety Security Team.

My religious discrimination story started when I was stationed on the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Benjamin Bottoms out of San Pedro, California. I was told by my command that I had to get the Covid shot or be dishonorably discharged from service. I was coming up on 17 years of service and wasn't able to put in for retirement at that time. I was worried that all my years of service were going to be for nothing. My command told me I have to get the shot or I would be given a dishonorable discharge for conduct unbecoming of a Petty Officer and possible non-judicial punishment (NJP).

Through some my own research I learned that the COVID shot was an MRNA Vaccine and was produced and developed with the use of aborted fetal cells. As a Christian that didn't align with my faith. I believe that life starts in the womb as Jeremiah 1:5 states, "before I formed you in the womb I knew you."

However, when I asked my command about obtaining a Religious Accommodation (RA), I was told I could try but it will most likely be denied because it was ordered by the President. I requested an RA anyway, which required proving my Christian faith to the Chaplain on base and obtaining an endorsement from my Commanding Officer (CO). Notably, my CO positively endorsed my RA request, explicitly stating that my ship would "be able to maintain mission readiness with no hindrance to operations if BM1 Jackson is granted a religious accommodation for the COVID-19 vaccine."

While I waited for my request to come back, my unit Chief told me it would be futile to pursue my career goal of advancement to Chief because I was "going to be discharged anyway" if I didn't get the COVID shot. In other words, the fix was in.

I soon received the initial denial of my RA request on the alleged grounds that an RA would undermine unit cohesion and self safety—even though my CO had stated otherwise. I found this unbelievable because my unit was the only one on the base that worked through COVID everyday and at full capacity while all other units had to only operate at about 10% capacity. I appealed the decision and refuted all of the initial denial's alleged justifications (which I understand were essentially identical for all fellow Coasties seeking similar RA's, regardless individual circumstances). However, my appeal was also denied. An admiral said that he "personally reviewed" my appeal and denied it after "extensive consideration." But he didn't discuss any of the issues I raised, and I found out that identical letters were sent to other religious

objectors too. I also found out that his “extensive consideration” lasted only a few minutes per person.

When the day came for me to report to the clinic and receive the COVID shot, I told my CO that I couldn’t in good faith and conscience receive this vaccine.

I then received formal performance and discipline reprimand letters with charges of disobeying a direct “lawful” order and conduct unbecoming of a Petty Officer with the punishment being dishonorable discharge from service. Around this time, I retained representation from the Thomas More Society (TMS). In September 2022, TMS filed an emergency lawsuit in federal court on behalf of myself and two other plaintiffs, along with a putative class of more than 1,000 similarly situated Coasties, against the Coast Guard’s categorical denial of RA’s from COVID-19 vaccination and its sham RA process. See *Jackson v. Noem*, 4:22-cv-825 (N.D. Texas). In response, the Coast Guard agreed to pause my discharge pending the outcome of the litigation. The Coast Guard then repealed its COVID-19 vaccine mandate in January 2023, following the Department of Defense’s (DOD’s) own repeal in response to the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (which directed the DOD, but not the Coast Guard—which is within the Department of Homeland Security—to end its COVID-19 vaccination mandate).

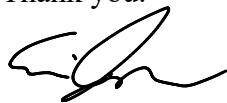
However, the Coast Guard retained discretion to discriminate against those like me who were unable to obtain the COVID shot for religious reasons. This was particularly troubling, because the Coast Guard still deemed us to be violators of an alleged “lawful” order—even though the Coast Guard’s refusal to consider our individual circumstances directly violated the First Amendment and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. And the Coast Guard had plenty of other ways to obstruct our careers besides discharge. For example, in August 2022 the Coast Guard made me move from California to Texas (even though Coast Guard regulations prohibited me from moving because I was allegedly unfit for service) essentially at the drop of a hat, despite the fact my wife was pregnant and we needed more time for the move. The Coast Guard rejected my pleas for a short delay or time off to help my wife with the move. Then, my new unit’s executive officer singled me out and refused to let me do the job I was sent to Texas to do. And then, while I was still allegedly unfit to serve our country, I was sent on a successful boat patrol mission with two other Coasties. When we returned, the other two were awarded and I received nothing.

Thus, we still needed judicial relief to protect against negative career consequences like these stemming from the Coast Guard’s unlawful violation of the First Amendment and RFRA. However, while our lawsuit was stuck in the district court (which found our case to be moot), the stress and anxiety became too much for me. After reaching 18 years of service, I made the difficult decision to retire in order to better serve my wife and newborn child. But I continued to pray for justice in our lawsuit—including during our appeal to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. By the grace of God, in March 2025, the Fifth Circuit issued its

decision and held that our case was not moot because the Coast Guard refused to make clear that religious service members like me did not violate a “lawful” order, and because it failed to fix its sham religious accommodation process.

Now, we are on the cusp of a historic resolution with the Coast Guard that will better help protect service members’ religious liberties for generations to come. But nothing can make up for the untold harms inflicted by the Coast Guard’s unlawful actions throughout this case. I know I speak for many Coasties in thanking the Religious Liberty Commission for bringing awareness to this issue and striving to better protect religious liberty in the military going forward. It should go without saying that service members do not shed all religious freedoms when they put on the uniform, and that when a commander issues an order violating service members’ religious liberty rights, that order is unlawful. The same religious beliefs that inspire us to be the best service members we can be were scoffed at and discarded as alleged threats to national security—even when commanders who knew us and our missions best said otherwise. The system failed us. We’re hopeful this Commission’s work can help fix it.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Jackson", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Eric Jackson

December 2025