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The Associate Press

US Marines posed with Nazi symbol in Afghanistan

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The Marine Corps on Thursday once again did damage control after a photograph surfaced of a sniper team in Afghanistan posing in front of a flag with a logo resembling that of the notorious Nazi SS — a special unit that murdered millions of Jews, gypsies and others.



The Corps said in a statement that using the symbol was not acceptable.

However, it was a naive mistake made by Marines who believed the SS symbol was meant to represent sniper scouts and never intended to associate themselves with a racist organization, said Maj. Gabrielle Chapin, a spokeswoman at Camp Pendleton.

The Marines in the image will not be disciplined because investigators determined there was no malicious intent, Chapin said.

Instead, the Corps used the incident as a training tool to talk to troops about what symbols are acceptable after it became aware of the photograph last November.

The image has since surfaced on an Internet blog.

"I don't believe that the Marines involved would have ever used any type of symbol associated the Nazi Germany military criminal organization that committed mass atrocities in WWII," Chapin said. "It's not within who we are as Marines."

It was the second time this year the Marine Corps has had to do damage control for actions of its troops. It's also investigating a separate group of Marines recorded on video urinating on the dead bodies of Taliban fighters.

Mikey Weinstein of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation in Washington said he has been flooded with calls from former Marines offended by the photo and from one member of his organization who is an Auschwitz concentration camp survivor.

"This is a complete and total outrage," he said.

Weinstein said his organization was sending a letter seeking a full investigation to the head of the Marine Corps and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta.

"First we have Marines peeing on dead bodies and now this," Weinstein said.

The Marines in the photograph are no longer with the unit. Chapin said she did not know if they are still in the Corps.

In the photo taken in September 2010 in the Afghanistan town of Sangin, the Marine Corps unit is posing with guns in front of an American flag and a large blue flag with what appear to be the letters "SS" in the shape of jagged lightning bolts.

The SS, or Schutzstaffel, was the police and military force of the Nazi Party, which was distinct from the general army. Members pledged an oath of loyalty to Adolph Hitler.

SS units were held responsible for many war crimes and played an integral role in the extermination of millions of Jews along with gypsies and other people who were deemed undesirable. The SS was declared to be a criminal organization at the Nuremberg war crime trials.