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Former New Orleans priest accused of abuse dies while facing military prosecution

Brian Highfill was 79 and had been accused by two airmen and three civilians

BY DAVID HAMMER AND RAMON ANTONIO VARGAS | WWL-TV and Staff writer

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A still image of a video depicting Henry Brian Highfill (provided photo)

David
Hammer |
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Ramon
Antonio
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Ed Joseph was optimistic he would finally get to confront Brian Highfill, a former New Orleans priest and Air Force chaplain who Joseph first accused of sexually abusing him 36 years ago.

Joseph, an Air Force veteran living in South Dakota, said a military investigator told him in December that he would soon be called to testify in a criminal case against Highfill.

But Joseph's hopes for justice — along with the hopes of at least one other airman and three civilians who claimed they were abused by Highfill over the last 20 years — were suddenly and emphatically dashed two weeks ago.

Highfill died from cancer on Jan. 23. He was 79. The Archdiocese of New Orleans announced Highfill's death in its weekly bulletin last week, without mentioning that the former priest was on the list of clergy who were credibly accused of sexually abusing minors. The announcement ends with the words "May he rest in peace."

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“He's not going to have eternal rest if there's such a thing — not considering the crimes that he's committed, crimes against humanity,” Joseph said. “And I'm going to just hopefully let him go and just move on. I have to. Otherwise, I'm going to torture myself.”



Undated photo of Brian Highfill
(courtesy of Mike Brandner)

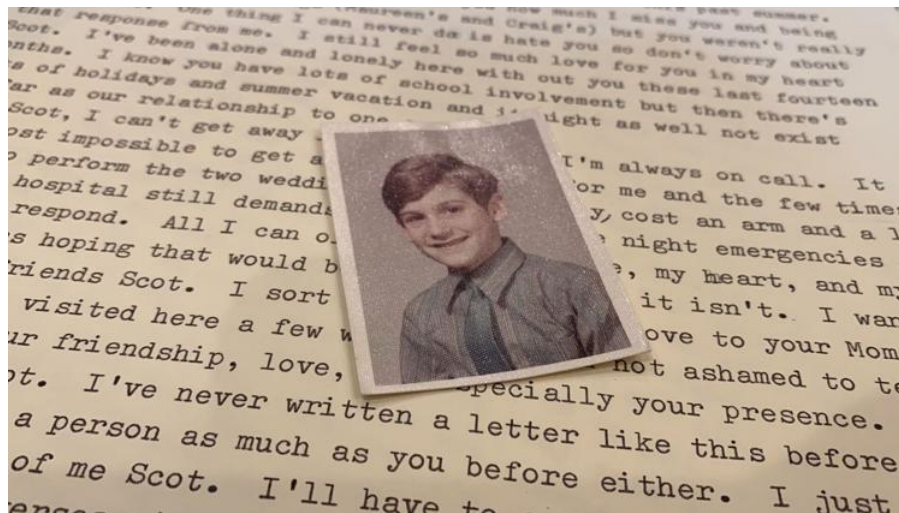
Former airman Thomas Furino said he's also crestfallen to hear of Highfill's death.

He reported to the federal Veterans Affairs department in 2004 that Highfill sexually assaulted him in 1982 near England

Air Force Base in Alexandria. His attorney, Soren Gisleson, said Air Force judge advocates told him they were preparing to prosecute Highfill for that alleged assault.

The Air Force Office of Special Investigations confirmed an open criminal case against Highfill.

The priest denied Furino's allegations in court documents, admitting instead to having a four-year sexual affair with a married woman during his time at the Louisiana base. Reached before his death, Highfill and his attorney declined to answer questions from WWL-TV and The Times-Picayune.



A photo of Scot Brandner with a letter he received from Brian Highfill (illustration by TJ Pipitone, WWL-TV)

Highfill was eventually suspended from ministry in 2018 after Mike Brandner Sr. went to the archdiocese and turned over stacks of love letters the priest had sent his little brother, Scot Brandner.

Years later, Scot Brander committed suicide.

Archbishop Gregory Aymond said the letters alone weren't enough to establish sexual abuse, but they did prompt him to look into Highfill's

record in the Air Force.
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He sent a letter to the Archbishop for the Military Services in October 2018, asking if the division had received any allegations against Highfill from his time as a chaplain.

Military Archbishop Timothy Broglio responded definitively the following month: "There is nothing in his personnel file that would cast suspicion on his ministry while a military chaplain."

However, Joseph said in 2016 he sent emails to the Archdiocese for the Military Services victims assistance coordinator and vicar general alleging Highfill sexually assaulted him at Bitburg Air Base in West Germany in 1986.

WWL-TV confronted the Archdiocese of the Military Services with Joseph's 2016 complaint and asked how Broglio could tell Aymond there was nothing that would cast suspicion on Highfill's ministry as a chaplain.

A spokesman responded: "The AMS did not receive any reports or briefings from the Air Force investigation and was not contacted to

participate in any investigation. Therefore,
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there were no findings to note in Msgr.
Highfill's personnel record."

Highfill was ordained in 1974 and served at Our Lady of the Rosary in New Orleans; St. Ann, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Edward the Confessor and St. Francis Xavier, all in Metairie; and St. Francis de Sales in Houma. He was assigned to the Diocese of Las Vegas when he was removed from ministry.

In 2020, Aymond eventually added Highfill to the church's list of credibly accused clergy.

He said the delay was due to the fact that he had not directly received any of the complaints, including those from Joseph and Furino, who allege that Highfill plied them with alcohol and then forced sexual contact when they were unconscious. A woman also reported in 2002 that Highfill molested her in a Metairie church in 1975 when she was 16.

"To be very honest, it angers me that we didn't have the information that we needed because this whole process would have been much simpler for us," Aymond said in 2020.