

Matthew Montenegro

EH 101

Dr. Morrow

December 3, 2019

Alcoholism in the Marine Corps

The United States Marine Corps is a branch of the military under the Department of Defense. It also happens to be a discourse community as defined by John Swales. A discourse community is a group of people containing six elements: a broadly agreed upon set of goals, intercommunication, participatory mechanisms, genres, lexis, and threshold level of membership (Swales 471-473). The United States Marine Corps meets all six of these elements. In the Marine Corps, a broadly agreed upon set of goals is the mission. The primary mission of the Marine Corps is war fighting. Intercommunication is the way that information is passed between members of the discourse community. Intercommunication in the Marine Corps is done primarily via the chain of command, a way of passing information mainly through word of mouth. Of these elements, the Marine Corps has issues with intercommunication, which has negative consequences on their broadly agreed upon goals. This issue exists largely because the leadership within the Marine Corps sends mixed messages that are not interpreted correctly by the junior Marines. Alcohol is the culprit that engulfs these specific problems. The prevalence of alcohol in the Marine Corps has a negative impact on the way the military branch operates, but by having a clear message and bringing awareness to the dangers of drinking irresponsibly, the Marine Corps can take a step in the right direction to become a more effective military force.

On November 10, 2019, the United States Marine Corps celebrated its 244th birthday, marking the date of the military branch's inception in a place called Tun Tavern in Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania. For Marines and sailors, this is a day to celebrate the branch's long illustrious history, from the battles won, the heroism of the Marines from the past and present, to the friends Marines may have lost in war. These ceremonies happen across the world in any clime and place, from the sands of Twenty-nine Palms, California, in the United States to the bases on Okinawa, Japan, Marines around the world celebrate this day. By and large, this day is focused on drinking with fellow Marines.

The day before my Marine Corps Birthday Ball, my unit was gathered to receive what is known as a safety brief. Typically, Marines in leadership positions speak at these and remind Marines to be responsible about everything from the use of contraceptives to not drinking and driving; everything is covered. Being that this safety brief was taking place before the Marine Corps Ball, the main topic was alcohol consumption. The highest enlisted member of the unit was speaking and said to Marines, "Drink a lot, but drink responsibly," ("Marine Corps Ball"), a particularly contradictory statement. This statement did not surprise me, as almost all the individual unit leadership across the Marine Corps has this problem with intercommunication. These mixed messages give Marines the mindset that breaking the rules is acceptable as long as they do not get caught. This is particularly troubling because the mixed signals being sent are not interpreted correctly, especially by the young, impressionable majority of Marines.

According to the 2017 Center for Naval Analyses Population Representation in the Military Services report, 68.64% of the total enlisted population in the Marine Corps was between the ages of 17-24 ("Population Representation in the Military"), making it the youngest branch of the military in demographic terms. This puts the Marines as a whole at greater risk for developing alcohol use disorders. The study "Alcohol Consumption in Demographic Subpopulations: An Epidemiologic Overview" concluded that the "prevalence of any alcohol

consumption peaks among young adults,”(Delker et al), the exact age group that the majority of the Marine Corps is categorized into. The Marine Corps is already at risk for Alcohol Use Disorders, just by the demographics, and it is because of this risk that these mixed messages are especially dangerous.

To describe the conception of the branch, Marines will often pridefully state that they were “born in a bar.” The culture of the Marine Corps has always been defined by drinking. In interviews conducted with Marine Corps service members, all of the Marines interviewed agreed that alcohol consumption is embedded in the culture of the Marine Corps (Bartelt, Horton, Morrison, Zehner). It is no surprise, then, that “more than two-thirds (68.2 percent) of service personnel perceived military culture to be supportive of drinking (e.g., indicated that drinking was 'part of being in my unit' or 'part of being in the military'). Marine Corps personnel, junior enlisted personnel, and men were the most likely to have this view,” (Meadows et al). Although this behavior is mostly takes place in casual areas, like in enlisted Marines’ living quarters or local bars, Marines have formalized occasions where this behavior can be seen as well. Some of these occasions include Marine Corps Balls, Mess Nights, and Warrior’s Nights. Although the purpose of these nights is not specifically to drink, drinking does occur and usually at high rates of consumption. All these ceremonies are typically done to improve morale, commemorate the accomplishments of the Marines of the past and present, and honor fallen Marines. This becomes the pretext to drink, as a form of celebration. Although this is not inherently a concern, these events do encourage drinking which does lead to it being done in excess. Mess Nights, for example, have what is known as the “grog,” a mixture of any number of ingredients to create a mystery punch; alcohol is typically one of these ingredients. These ceremonies, that are very

common across all units and bases within the Marine Corps, exemplify Marines' eagerness to consume alcohol.

Being the best or number one is also something that is deeply embedded into the culture of the Marine Corps. From the moment one speaks to a Marine Corps recruiter this sentiment is clear in their recruiting methods. Recruiters usually go with the, "if you think you have what it takes, you might make it," approach. From there it is further ingrained into Marines that they are the best during recruit training, where their sense of pride for being a Marine grows. This sense of pride gives Marines the "right" to boast about almost anything; it truly does not matter what the issue is. It is because of this perceived "right" that Marines will flip even negative situations into positive ones. For example, though the United States Department of Defense allocates the least amount of funding to the Marine Corps, Marines take pride in "having to do more with less." In a similar vein, having the statistic of the branch that consumes the most alcohol gives some Marines a sense of pride in their "accomplishment." After consulting with Marines I served with, we came to the conclusion that particularly young Marines have a notion that this part of Marine culture needs to be upheld and cannot be surpassed by other branches (Bartelt, Horton, Morrison, Zehner). The same competitive nature that says we need to be number one at everything reinforces this thought.

The high operations tempo in the Marine Corps, meaning that we have more operations happening more often, further strengthens that "number-one," mentality that the Marine Corps has as an institution. This high tempo of operations creates stress that is felt from the top, down. According to CNBC, enlisted military personnel comes in at number one for the most stressful job of 2019 (Renzulli). Although the Marine Corps does have programs in place to try to combat the stress felt by service members, most Marines prefer to self medicate their stress by

consuming alcohol. On top of this, given the nature of being in the military, Marines will at times have to do or see things that cannot be unseen or undone, leaving invisible wounds. Scenarios like killing someone in combat or witnessing a fellow service member being killed can cause Marines to develop mental issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression: “PTSD has been the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorder for veterans returning from combat.” The issue with this is that, “not only do alcohol use disorders complicate recovery from posttraumatic mental health disorders, such as PTSD, but these stress-related conditions have been found to impede recovery from alcoholism,” (Delker et al). In layman’s terms, those that self-medicate end up creating a bigger problem for themselves.

The problems the Marines have with their alcohol consumption is not limited to the Marine Corps as an institution. These problems affect the United States on a global scale. While the main mission of the Marine Corps is warfighting, during times of peace, missions change. During these times, the mission of the Marine Corps becomes to build and maintain strategic allies throughout the world. This mission becomes compromised when Marines act irresponsibly while under the influence of alcohol primarily, while they are overseas. In Okinawa, Japan this happens all too frequently. On Sunday, November 19, 2017, a U.S. Marine driving under the influence of alcohol caused a head-on collision that took the life of a Japanese national (Burke). In retaliation to this, 29 vehicles owned by U.S. military personnel were vandalized by Japanese nationals as well as apartment complexes where U.S. military personnel lived (RT International). In a separate case, the Marine Corps Times reported that on October 12, 2014, a U.S. Marine killed a transgender woman by strangulation in the Philippines. This happened after the Marine met the transgender woman at a bar in Olongapo, Philippines (The Associated Press). This event caused the United States’ ties with the Philippines to diminish and pushed the Philippines closer

to China. Political groups throughout the Philippines called for an end to the U.S. military presence in the Philippines because of this event (Morales). This is a clear example of how the Marine Corps' mission becomes compromised because of alcohol abuse. Marines may not see the implications of their actions, but reckless acts committed by service members while under the influence of alcohol can have negative geo-political consequences for the United States.

These consequences are not limited to geo-political relations; they also have negative financial consequences for the United States. The U.S. Military loses \$1.12 billion per year because of productivity losses contributed directly to excessive alcohol consumption. It is also estimated that 320,000 work days are lost and 34,400 arrests occur per year, directly because of service members drinking in excess. This results in approximately 10,400 active-duty military personnel being unable to deploy and 2,200 facing separation from the military, further exemplifying how the Marine Corps' mission becomes spoiled because of excessive alcohol consumption (Schumm et al).

The intercommunication within the Marine Corps needs to be looked at in an objective manner in order to see the root causes of these issues. As previously mentioned, the mixed messages sent by individual unit leaders do not give a clear insight to how the institution of Marine Corps actually feels about alcohol. On one hand, unit leaders romanticize the act of consuming alcohol in excess due to their own nostalgic feelings associated with the act. On the other hand, if it becomes a nuisance, Marines get reprimanded by these same individuals. Instead of giving younger Marines the image that the "Marine thing" to do is to drink alcohol, senior Marines should tell younger Marines about the negative experiences they have had or have witnessed others having. This could deter Marines from drinking or cause the ones that choose to drink, to do so in a responsible manner. Although these conversations do happen, it is usually

after an alcohol related incident has occurred, but time passes and the rhetoric switches back to the romanticization of alcohol consumption. Marines need to realize that one night of temporary pleasure can lead to a lifetime of regret. General Robert B. Neller, the 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, started a campaign with the phrase, “Protect what you’ve earned,” (Saad). This slogan is meant to get Marines thinking about the consequences of their actions and how they can lose the title “Marine” if they make an irresponsible decision. Unfortunately, this is not the mentality of the Marine Corps as a whole, but with the support of the Marine Corps’ individual unit leaders, Marines across the branch can shift their attitude towards wanting to be mindful of protecting what they have earned.

Like all discourse communities the Marine Corps has its issues. Although the problem with Marines and their alcohol consumption can be traced back to its inception, this issue can be remedied. With individual units' leaders becoming more vocal about the problem and with a clear message delivered, Marines as a whole will have a change in their view of alcohol consumption. This will definitely not be an easy road to success, but if there is one thing that Marines do well, it is overcoming adversity.

Works Cited

Bartelt, Andy. Interview. 8 Nov. 2019

Burke, Matthew M. “Marine Gets 4 Years with Hard Labor for Drunken-Driving Death of Okinawa Man.” *Stars and Stripes*, 10 Apr. 2018, www.stripes.com/news/pacific/marine-gets-4-years-with-hard-labor-for-drunken-driving-death-of-okinawa-man-1.521405.

Delker, Erin, et al. "Alcohol Consumption in Demographic Subpopulations: An Epidemiologic Overview." *Alcohol Research : Current Reviews*, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4872616/.

Horton, Kyle. Interview. 8 Nov 2019

Marine Corps Ball. Observation. 16 Nov. 2019

Meadows, et al. "Findings of the Health Related Behaviors Survey." *RAND Corporation*, 21 June 2018, www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9955.html.

Morales, Neil J. "Philippine Court Upholds Guilty Verdict on U.S. Marine in Transgender Woman's Killing." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 10 Apr. 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-court-idUSKBN17C0FT.

Morrison, Thomas. Interview. 8 Nov. 2019

"Population Representation in the Military Services 2017." *Center for Naval Analyses*, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, www.cna.org/pop-rep/2017/contents/contents.html.

Renzulli, Kerri A. "The Most Stressful Job in America Pays \$26,802." *CNBC*, CNBC, 8 Mar. 2019, www.cnbc.com/2019/03/07/the-most-stressful-jobs-in-america.html.

Saad, Fatmeh. "Protect What You've Earned." *II Marine Expeditionary Force*, 20 Aug. 2015, www.iimef.marines.mil/News/News-Article/Article/614676/protect-what-youve-earned/Voas/.

Schumm, Jeremiah A, and Kathleen M Chard. "Alcohol and Stress in the Military." *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arcr344/401-407.htm.

Swales, John. "The Concept of Discourse Community." *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs, Bedford/St. Martins, 2011. 471-473

The Associated Press. "Marine's Conviction for Killing Transgender Filipino Affirmed by Appellate Court." *Marine Corps Times*, Marine Corps Times, 7 Aug. 2017, www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2017/04/10/marine-s-conviction-for-killing-transgender-filipino-affirmed-by-appellate-court/.

"US Military Vehicles & Homes Vandalized after 'Drunk' Marine Blamed for Fatal Okinawa Car Crash." *RT International*, 21 Nov. 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/410547-us-military-vandalized-okinawa/>.

Zehner. Zach. Interview. 9 Nov 2019