

Air Force Abuzz Over Moderation

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. - A nuclear missile base here is using unorthodox tactics to combat an old problem in the military ranks: drinking to excess.

No one at F.E. Warren Air Force Base has been ordered not to drink alcohol. But the base commander, alarmed by the number of booze-related crimes among his troops, has ordered a marketing and education campaign to spread a sobering message: Irresponsible drinking threatens the base's preparedness and will jeopardize careers.

The campaign, which includes alcohol-free activities for underage personnel and other measures, began last spring. It has quickly become so effective that Pentagon brass are taking note. Other Air Force bases might follow Warren's lead.

"It's creating some buzz," says Col. Evan Hoapili, commander of Warren's 90th Space Wing, who set up the program. Alcohol abuse, he says, is "a health crisis. And in the military, it is a readiness issue."

By any measure, Hoapili's campaign is working. In the final three months of 2004, incidents involving alcohol at Warren declined 74% from the start of the year. That includes driving violations, public drunkenness, domestic violence, sexual assault, thefts and other infractions. The base reported 81% fewer cases of underage drinking and 45% fewer drunken-driving arrests.

Ubiquitous message

The program and its catch phrase for safe drinking -- "0-0-1-3" -- are drilled into everyone at Warren, as are the dangers of not heeding the message. Repeat offenders risk public discipline, demotion, even discharge.

The numbers stand for four limits on alcohol: zero underage drinking, zero drunken-driving arrests, and one drink an hour, up to three per night for those who do imbibe. The two zeroes, Hoapili says, are self-explanatory: They are the law. The "1-3," he adds, are based on health and safety research. The average liver can't process more than one drink an hour. And generally, having three drinks in an evening keeps a person just below the blood-alcohol limit for drunken driving and the four-drink threshold that researchers define as binge drinking.

Hoapili's boss, Gen. Lance Lord, head of Air Force Space Command, had the colonel brief the rest of his group's commanders on "0-0-1-3" at a leadership conference last fall. Lord has discussed the program with Gen. John Jumper, Air Force chief of staff. It's

likely to make the agenda at next month's "Corona" conference, where Jumper and the Air Force's other four-star generals discuss readiness and personnel issues. From there, the program potentially could go Air Force-wide.

"Look, if we could order every (airman) to drink safely, I would have done it a long time ago," Lord says.

"I think this has got national appeal and national applicability," Lord says. "When we show the worth and the benefits, this will be a model."

The "0-0-1-3" slogan, in graffiti-style script backed by purple flames, is everywhere at Warren, a former 19th-century cavalry post that controls Peacekeeper and Minuteman missiles in silos across parts of Wyoming, Nebraska and Colorado. Wall posters, window decals, key-chain fobs for official vehicles, napkin-holder cards in the mess hall, even the pages of the weekly Warren Sentinel carry the logo. But Hoapili (pronounced ho-ah-PEE-lee) downplays the slogan and says the science behind it is the key.

"People are just used to counting stuff, like carbs," he says. "Three drinks makes sense to us to try to keep that blood-alcohol level low."

Screening and education

The program includes alcohol screening and education, as well as treatment for abusers. Servicemembers under age 30, who make up more than two-thirds of Warren's 3,500 uniformed personnel, are the main target because binge drinking is a particular problem among young adults. So there are new off-duty alternatives for under-age troops. The options range from pizza parties and midnight basketball-and-music sessions ("Hip-Hop Hoops") to paintball, movie and cartoon fests, club nights with DJs and group outings off base.

"There is a stereotype that if you're old enough to die for your country, you're old enough to drink," Hoapili says. "If you're going to tell people that alcohol is not the way to go, you have to give them something else to do."

Whatever the motivation, "0-0-1-3" is now part of the Warren culture. A frequent wisecrack involves stopping for beer at the on-base convenience store "to pick up a three-pack for the night."

Airman 1st Class Sivan McCoy, 20, says the numbers "are still in the back of your mind, even when you joke. I say to friends, 'Hey, that's your third drink of water.' "

Timely response

The campaign is timely. Last spring, a militarywide survey of substance use noted a rise in heavy drinking in the younger ranks, chiefly ages 18-25.

Hoapili, 45, quickly discovered alcohol "was a big problem here" when he assumed command in August 2003. The night he took over, a young enlisted man was arrested on

a charge of drunken driving. After a rash of incidents, the colonel ordered his staff to tackle the issue. A base survey soon found that the average airman thought "unsafe" drinking began with eight drinks or more.

"It is not against the law to drink 10 drinks," Hoapili says. "But what does 'drink responsibly' mean? If I told that to the average guy here, he'd drink seven drinks." The commander is also using velvet-fisted diplomacy with Wyoming and Colorado bars and liquor stores within partying distance of the base. In a letter to hundreds of outlets last year, Hoapili thanked them for their "diligence and continued support" in not serving airmen under 21 -- and warned them that if they do serve minors, he can forbid all his troops from patronizing them.

Some on base bristle at the campaign as yet another edict from the top. "You have enough restrictions on you in the military already," says Tech. Sgt. Jason Bundy, 32, who says he knows his own limit and won't "count how many (beer) cans I've crushed" when he's off duty on a camping trip.

But Bundy says the base brass are "still allowing you to be adults, but just with an air of a little more caution."

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