

Quick-Look Report: USMC.2017.0005



Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Alcohol

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About the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project

What is MCOCR?

The MCOCR Project is a small, exploratory, qualitative research effort intended to gather Marine perspectives on a range of issues related to Marine Corps culture. The project resulted in 150 semi-structured interviews and 32 semi-structured focus groups with 267 unique participants (nine Marines participated in both an interview and a focus group). All participants were volunteers, and the project was conducted under a protocol approved by the Marine Corps Human Research Protection Program. The project was conducted under Marine Corps University's academic freedom policy.

How should the information in this report be used?

Because of the non-representative sample, data and analysis from MCOCR are intended to inform discussions in conjunction with other information sources. They should not be used to make broad claims about Marines or Marine Corps programs and policies.

Were Marine statements fact-checked?

No. The intent of the project was to gather Marine perspectives without regard to whether the perspectives were based on full knowledge of current Marine Corps policies and programs. In some cases, it was important to capture misperceptions, as they have implications for internal Marine Corps messaging.

What are the project's limitations?

1. The MCOCR sample was not designed to be representative of the Marine Corps population in terms of sex, race/ethnicity, MOS, or other characteristics. Therefore, the data cannot be used in statistical analysis designed to make claims about all Marines. Sample demographics are included in the March 2018 report from the project, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/AD1079774>.
2. The project did not include reservists or recently retired/separated Marines due to Marine Corps interpretation of DoD guidance on information collections at the time the research was designed.
3. We did not actively seek volunteers above E-8s and O-5s; therefore, the senior voice is not strong in the sample.

Who funded and sponsored the project?

The project falls within the normal scope of work of CAOCL's Translational Research Group (TRG), and the majority of the project was funded out of CAOCL's existing budget. Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) requested that the research be done, but the research design, conduct, and analysis were controlled by TRG. M&RA provided assistance with logistics, travel for research team members who were not part of CAOCL, and funding to accelerate transcription of audio recordings.

When and where were data gathered?

Between August and October 2017, the research team gathered data at the following locations: Pentagon, MCB Quantico, MCB Camp Lejeune, MCAS Cherry Point, MCB Camp Pendleton, MCAGCC 29 Palms, MCAS Yuma, and MCB Camp Butler (Okinawa).

What are the qualifications and characteristics of the research team?

The principal investigator is a cultural anthropologist with more than 20 years of experience working with and doing research on national security organizations, including 10 years leading research teams on projects focused on the Marine Corps. The composition of the MCOCR research team has changed between 2017 and 2020, but team members have possessed graduate-level educational backgrounds in the following disciplines: cultural anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, international relations, education, communication, and evaluation science. Data gathering teams included male and female researchers. To the maximum extent possible, participants were allowed to choose the sex of the researcher with whom they interacted. All team members thus far have been Caucasian. The data gathering team included two members with Marine backgrounds. One was a recently retired field-grade Marine officer, and the other was an active duty company-grade Marine officer. The research team also consulted with other social scientists and Marines during design and analysis.

MCOCR Quick Look Report: Alcohol

That's the culture of the Marine Corps. "Booze it up. Drink hard, Marine."

- Captain, MCAS Yuma, #523

Just in the time that I have been in the Marine Corps, [the drinking aspect] has definitely toned down a lot, but very much a drinking aspect to the culture.

- Major, MCAS Cherry Point, #068

Even the whole drinking thing, ... that's changing too. Like it's not emphasized as much as it used to be.

- Sergeant, MCB Camp Pendleton, #611

Executive Summary

When discussing the broad topics of leadership, cohesion, and gender bias, Marines talked about alcohol a lot. While not surprising, given the strongly held beliefs about Marines' relationship with alcohol, the ways Marines discussed alcohol and used alcohol-specific language present a much more complex relationship. In this report, we examine the following themes:

1. Marine collective identity as "we are drinkers" contested by stories of disappointment and other narratives of self as Marine in relation to alcohol
2. Marines' use of alcohol-specific language to reference cohesion building practices in informal spaces and to indicate bad behavior, offering two visions of the intersection of alcohol and Marine behavior
3. Marine perception of specific alcohol-related issues:
 - a. The safety brief – more a leadership self-protection tool than an effective way to inform individual behavior
 - b. The expected challenges with alcohol when dealing with the immature Marine demographic and the needed engaged, compassionate leadership response
 - c. The illegality of alcohol-related behaviors and the leadership challenges they present
 - d. The sex and rank considerations in informal spaces, as described through alcohol-specific language

The diversity of individual perspectives on alcohol and how it nests within Marine identity demonstrate a more flexible stance on alcohol's place in Marines' individual conception of self than in the collectively held belief and offers an alternative, more balanced understanding of the role of alcohol in Marine lived experience. Deeper and broadened analysis into these themes may offer opportunities to evolve how Marines and the Marine Corps think and talk about and interact with alcohol as well may provide institutional opportunities to refine and create policies, practices, and narratives to shape the future force.

Introduction

Since its inception, the Marine Corps has had an intimate, complex relationship with alcohol. Its presence, interwoven into storied Marine and conception narratives and the monolithic perception of those external to the organization, serves as a source of pride. Its contradictory position in Marine Corps rituals and policy serves as a source of confusion. Its near omnipresence in the varied wrong-doings of Marines serves as a source of concern. Its presence in the stories and perspectives of Marines, surprisingly, reveals that, despite the persistence of the "booze it up" image, not all Marines easily

adhere to this element of Marine identity. How Marines discuss and reference alcohol should pique organizational interest, as it reveals a more nuanced relationship than the assumed monolithic adherence to the debauched, storied Marine image.

In 2017, a group of researchers from the Marine Corps' Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning's Translational Research Group (TRG) carried out exploratory research¹ on leadership, cohesion, and gender bias. In focus groups and interviews with 267 Marines across the Marine Corps enterprise, the researchers gathered Marine perceptions on these topics, allowing them to choose how to discuss them. The researchers did not ask about alcohol; however, the topic permeated the resulting transcripts. This report will not focus on the presence of alcohol in stories of wrong-doings, such as sexual harassment and sexual assault. While present in the data, this theme is well-known. This report explores other ways Marines referenced alcohol². How it displayed in the data provides a deeper understanding of how alcohol intersects with Marine identity and behavior and how Marines think about specific alcohol-related issues.

How Marines use alcohol to talk about Marine identity and behavior

Marines talked about alcohol a lot. When researchers asked about ideal/bad Marines, leadership challenges, or cohesion, alcohol would work its way into the discussion. Marines used alcohol-related stories or language to comment both positively and negatively on Marine identity and behavior. In analyzing Marine responses, researchers identified three themes that emerged: collective identity, the "grab a beer" construct, and alcohol as the "go-to" example for negative behavior. Understanding how Marines use alcohol when talking about these three areas offers institutional and program leaders insights into how to craft programmatic and policy responses.

Collective Identity – Marines are drinkers

Drinking has been long associated with the Marine image. Origin stories are replete with alcohol references. "[W]e started as a bunch of drunk sailors in the fucking bar one time in Pennsylvania," explained Sergeant #050³. John Basilone, a revered Marine, was described by Chief Warrant Officer 2 #057 as a "drunkard and all that stuff. He was not the picture-perfect Marine, but Jesus, look what he did." A couple of Marines referenced Eleanor Roosevelt's description of Marines as being tough and debauched⁴, one describing it as something "we take pride in."⁵ Even today, "People see Marines as the dumb, drunk infantry that go into countries and blow things up and have fun," stated Gunnery Sergeant #621.

¹ This research was conducted under Human Subjects Protection Protocol USMC.2017.0005 and MCU's academic freedom policy. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual speakers and researcher and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Marine Corps or Davis Defense Group.

² Note: this report uses long excerpts from transcripts intentionally to allow the Marines to speak to these issues themselves.

³ In a MCB Camp Lejeune sergeant and below focus group.

⁴ The Marines could not remember the exact words. Here are her words, "The Marines I have seen around the world have the cleanest bodies, the filthiest minds, the highest morale, and the lowest morals of any group of animals I have ever seen. Thank God for the United States Marine Corps!"

⁵ Captain #619.

This understanding of collective self is strong and shared both internally within the Corps and externally. Marines described alcohol as being “*very big in the Marine Corps culture*”⁶. Major #053 agreed, stating “*The Marine Corps is a substance using, and I would even go as far as to say substance abusing culture. It is a culture of alcohol.*” Marines referenced institutional behavior that is permissive and encouraging of alcohol. First Lieutenant #326 stated, “*the majority of the Marine Corps culture, I would say, very much encourages drinking.*” Chief Warrant Officer 2 #017 talked about alcohol-related Marine Corps Ball gifts, and Captain #523 talked about the abundance of alcohol at “*Birthday Balls, Dining Ins, Dining Outs, you know, these formal events.*” The captain also discussed the kangaroo courts “*where aviators receive their call signs*” as “*basically ... filled with a lot of drunkenness and chicanery*”. Major #053 described O Calls or Officers’ Calls, where “*booze is on tap or they’re paid for or whatever, and it’s a mandatory event that you need to come to*”. Another, Second Lieutenant #125, talked about her Mess Night, “*Of course, at Mess Night, it’s tradition that we have a few drinks, all that stuff, and people can elect not to drink, but for the most part, people had their beverages.*” Captain #235 provided the “unofficial”, but sanctioned, cultural norms within aviation and described how pilots are expected

to be two of three things to be successful. You need to be able to party and drink and talk the talk. So you need to be a cool dude. You need to be incredibly smart or you need to be incredibly- an incredibly good stick. So as long as you have two of three. And typically, the one that they don't tell you is like you have to be liked and the party goer and be able to joke around and really walk the line as to- as far as professionalism is concerned to be an aviator.

Like the above captain, several Marines talked about drinking as just being expected or part of being a Marine. Captain #014, in response to the question “is the stereotypical Marine a hard drinker?”, offered, “*I think they’re a drinker. I don’t know hard drinker, not, but definitely drinker, definitely alcohol.*” First Lieutenant #307 noted, “*I mean, alcohol – a crazy problem. ... Part of the problem is it’s just kind of accepted.*” Sergeant #222 in Twentynine Palms explained,

It sounds bad, but Marines drink. I’m not gonna deny it. I’ll be back home on leave, and it’s like a Tuesday night, and ... I call a buddy. Like, “Hey, let’s go to a bar or something.” And he’ll be like, “Dude, it’s Tuesday. I got school tomorrow.” I’m like, “What?!” Then I remember I have to realize that I’m not with my Marines anymore or with my peers that would have no problem drinking on a Tuesday night ... That’s just part of the Marine mentality, and again, I don’t think it’s right. I don’t do it anymore, but I’ve definitely been there. It’s just part of being a Marine.”

Contested Identity – While strong, there are cracks

While many might agree with its “just part of being a Marine” and widely accepted, it is not quite that simple. The Marines who participated in this research offered a more nuanced picture than that viewed from the outside and held collectively. Major #126 challenged the simplistic stereotypical Marine construct, linking that to an immature view of the Marine Corps’ purpose. He stated,

[W]e have this problem where we think that because- all right, so the assumption and the very glib bumper sticker remark is, “We exist to kill people and break things.” That is partially true. That’s not the entire role of the military. The military’s job is to exercise American policy as directed by America’s elected leaders whether that’s ‘kill people and break things’ or humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, noncombatant evacuation operations. ‘We do windows,’ essentially. We do everything, everything from handing out humanitarian rations to killing people and breaking things. But everyone focuses on the killing people and breaking things part because killing people is such a social taboo. It’s the thing- it’s like the one thing that you’re not supposed to do in a civilized society.

⁶ Captain #014.

And because we have young people who focus on the killing people part, they think then that because we have this incredibly horrific role, where we are supposed to snuff out life, that lower orders of socially unacceptable behavior are inherently acceptable because we asked them to kill people. So, because I asked Lance Corporal 'Belt Buckle' 0311 to kill people, that must inherently also mean that he is allowed to curse, he is allowed to drink a lot, he is allowed to be vaguely racist, vaguely sexist or very specifically racist and sexist because those are also behaviors that are lumped under socially unacceptable, right? But they're lower orders of socially unacceptable than say killing people. But because we allow them to do this up here "kill people", that must mean that also this stuff is okay. We're Marines. We're supposed to be mean. We're not supposed to be politically correct. We're supposed to be tattooed, snaggletooth, fucking ugly people who are nasty and lift weights and smoke cigars and drink beer and kill people. Um, and that's a very immature view of the Marine Corps' role in America, right. America wants the Marine Corps, not just because we're good at killing people, but because we can do whatever it is that America asks us to do.

Also, much of the discussion surrounding the institutional endorsement of alcohol was preceded or followed with a negatively toned discussion or a "but ..." and focused on institutional or leadership hypocrisy. For example, Chief Warrant Officer 2 #017 above discussing the Birthday Ball gifts pointed out the hypocrisy of institutional behavior, stating, "So we tell Marines they can't drink underage. ... Then they go to the Ball and what do you get? You get a mug or a champagne flute as a gift as an 18-year-old. So here's a mug, but you can't do anything with it." Sergeant #611 also pointed out this contradictory behavior surrounding the Marine Corps Ball and the preceding safety briefs. She explained, "For the Marine Corps Ball, like ... we're founded in a bar, so we're all supposed to drink a lot ..., and on the other side we get safety briefs and we're told, 'oh, hey, don't go out and drink. Don't go drink and drive So I feel like there are some things where it doesn't match. It's contradictory. And then like when we all go out to the Ball, we're all hyped up, everybody is drinking, but at the same time, they're like 'oh, make sure you're safe and everything.'" Major #053 called the organizational "lip service to 'don't drink and drive'" ridiculous when discussing the mandated alcohol-infused Officers' Calls. Captain #523 offered the following example of a gunnery sergeant at the Marine Corps Ball to point out leadership hypocrisy that sends contradictory messaging to Marines.

They keep pushing down, "Hey, proper, responsible use" ... the social drinker concept, but it's never modeled. Maybe it is by some, but by and large- I can remember a squadron gunnery sergeant. We were at the Ball, and I was going to get a new pitcher of water for my table 'cause ours was out, and I was, you know, I was, like, "Hey, Gunny, how you doin'?" You know, "Hey, you guys need some water over there?" He's like, "What? F' No. If I'm- the only thing I'm drinkin' is gonna have alcohol in it." And this is, I mean, this wasn't like just a quiet conversation. He was sitting at his table, and it was loud enough for five other tables around him to hear what was going on. So, you know, the message we're sending down to these younger Marines is that, "yeah, this is what it's all about." ... But we're not doing it. And I think it's because maybe it's, for some of us, it's, "Yeah, okay, we have to say this because we have to." But inside, that leader of Marines thinks that getting smashed is perfectly fine.

Additionally, there were quite a few participants who declared themselves non-drinkers or who talked about other Marines who were not drinkers. This came up more frequently in discussions about fit and cohesion. There is not monolithic adherence to the "Marines are drinkers" identity. While First Lieutenant #326 recognized the majority drink, she noted the presence of "a subculture of people who are like very devout and very not interested in partying and drinking." But not all chose to abstain from drink for religious reasons. Lance Corporal #624 explained, "I don't drink. I don't smoke. I just kind of chill. I mean, I get tattoos. Like that's the craziest thing I do." Major #068 explained, "This is not any religious or anything based, for example, I don't drink. I never have." Captain #523 stated,

I don't drink, but that's a personal choice. I've tried it before. Many of my peers have tried to get me to drink too, and it's like, "Look, guys, it's not that I'm opposed to drinking. It's not a religious thing that- basically, why I choose not to drink for the most part is I see how everyone else approaches drinking. It's the mindset. It's, "I can't be having fun if I'm not drunk." "If there isn't alcohol, I'm not interested in going." That's the kind of the nature that I don't understand, and it's- you know what? I'm not gonna associate myself with that. I don't wanna be lumped into that crowd. 'Cause if I stay with it enough, I'll be more apt to become one of them, and that's not a, that's not a path I wanna take. [paper shuffling] It's not a part of who I am, and it's not something I wanna be.

Some who took this stance felt isolated like Gunnery Sergeant #300. She talked about her and her husband's experiences of being different. She explained,

Nowadays if you're not in the "in" crowd – "Oh, I'm not a drinker." "Oh, you're pussy" "Oh, you're not a Marine. What Marine doesn't drink?" – you can't even like- you know, like me and my husband are not drinkers. My husband has never in the clique. You know what I mean? Because he's definitely- he doesn't speak bad about women, and he loves his mom. That's like his best friend. So he's not like your typical, I guess, man, I guess, "man" man. But these are certain things that he tries to teach the younger Marines and stuff like that. But it's just like if you're not that thing – "I wear khakis and Hawaiian shirts sometimes. And I drink." – like it's like you're not accepted.

Major #068, when asked if not drinking affected his ability to fit in, vacillated a bit, stating, "Yes, I would say that, right, but well, sort of. I have done the best without compromising my own values." He felt he needed to participate in the event, not the actual drinking, to fit in with the group. He continued, "I tagged along to be part of the team. ... Now, if I avoided those [events], I could see ... people wondering, ... 'How come he is never there?' So I could see maybe people thinking that."

Others did not experience social isolation. In a focus group on Twentynine Palms, Staff Sergeant #629 spoke about his relationship with another participant, Staff Sergeant #635, saying "like Alpha [SSgt #635] doesn't drink for a fact, and we get along just fine. I mean, he's not outcasted for that matter." First Lieutenant #025 explained during a focus group,

I don't drink. I'm looked upon as being different but like not an outcast for that. [unidentified participant utters 'yeah'] I think it's hilarious to some respect. It's-it's sad, but hilarious, like where you have the recruiting posters with the shined boots, I mean, to what you were describing like to the T. But then you've got memes all over Facebook with people in their gas masks in the barracks just like flooding them with beer. [unidentified participant utters 'yeah']

This disillusionment or sadness was apparent in several Marines' accounts. First Lieutenant #307 who referenced the Eleanor Roosevelt's characterization of Marines reflected, "so hard fighting individuals who are also so debauched like at the same time. And we laugh about that, and that's like a mark of pride, and yet it's sad, right? That we're 'ha ha, that's us.' ... Like maybe we shouldn't take pride in being debauched." Captain #619 who referenced this quotation as well also recognized that the image's currency was waning. He stated in a focus group, "So like we tell that to ourselves, and we're like we're all about it, but it's not funny anymore because now there's a whole lot more transparency with Facebook and all that jazz." Another of the focus group participants, Major #623, continued, "Well, it's not socially acceptable anymore. Before, alcohol, driving, and all that stuff, it was acceptable. Now it's no longer acceptable so you have to change your culture with it." Sergeant #611 has seen a slight change in that direction, stating, "Even with the whole drinking thing I was saying earlier, that's changing too. Like it's not emphasized as much as it used to be. ... I see a change going down in and not as many Marines drink as crazily." Gunnery Sergeant #612 agreed, "There is far [emphasizes "far"] less drinking now than when I first joined. Yes, Marines still drink, but I would argue that more Marines now drink just

to potentially socially drink than they used to to get drunk.” Yes, but other Marines countered that, such as Second Lieutenant #037 who expressed, *“I’ve seen more lewdness and debauchery inside the Corps than in society. The whole ‘earned it and put you to another level’, like I’m for that, and I try to live that. But the lifestyle I’ve seen, even among peer officers, has not resembled that.”* One Marine in Okinawa, Private First Class #262, lamented the need for the repeated safety briefs and the vigilance of the Japanese police, explaining if it was not such a prevalent problem, there would not be a need for the “sheep dip” or blanket response targeting all Marines.

How many times do we get briefs about people underage drinking out in town? How many times you get briefs about Marines acting like complete morons out in town? That reflects on us. If this like one incident every three years, they’re not gonna be like, “Oh, all Marines are bad.” When it’s multiple, every single weekend, there’s reasons why the Japanese police always like, whenever they see Americans, they always keep an eye out for them.

Identity: So are Marines drinkers?

Most of these Marines talked about alcohol as almost an ascribed identity factor of the Marine collective identity. Foundational and reinforced through story, external belief, institutional practices, and leadership behaviors, the identity factor is strong. However, its “ascribed” status is challenged by those expressing disappointment in institutional and leadership behavior and by those Marines who do not accept this and still are considered by self and others as Marines. In other words, there are many instances of “This is who we are but not who I am.” This fragility of the Marine collective adherence to “Marines are drinkers” offers opportunity for a different narrative to normalize a more nuanced vision of collective self. The Marines themselves offer ways to frame that by the way they reference alcohol when discussing Marine behavior.

Behavior: Let’s “grab a beer”

When Marines used alcohol as a referent for behavior, it repeatedly fell into two categories: the “Grab a beer” construct and as the go-to example for negative behavior. Marines used variations of the “grab a beer” to connote informal social space and convey a sense of trust – the “I trust you enough to lose a bit of control with you” type idea. Marines used alcohol-specific language to describe efforts at building camaraderie and social bonding and at smoothing over professional challenges in an informal space. For example, to build cohesion, Lance Corporal #261 stated, *“I was a PFC at the time. So I got out here and like they even said before our unit, ‘You know, new guy, we’ll take him out. If he’s of age,’ you know, ‘we’ll take him to, you know, Samurai’s or Eightballs, somewhere like that. Get him a few drinks whatever, take him to the Breeze.”* Master Sergeant #638’s words also link alcohol to building camaraderie. *“I think it has to start from the senior leaders being more engaged. ... Like if I can gather them around on a Friday afternoon, ‘Hey, everyone’s going to meet me at the volleyball court. We’re going to have a beer, those of you that are 21, obviously. The rest of you can have a soda and just sit there and bullshit with them, spending 20-30 minutes making everyone hang out, hanging out for one drink.”* Sergeant #049, when asked with whom he would choose to spend time, responded, *“If you’d like to drink a beer around a bonfire, then I’ll probably hang out with you.”* First Lieutenant #45 described people at work with whom she would not consider friends in the following way, *“I would never call them up to go have a beer.”* To express camaraderie with the Marines in the focus group in which he was participating, Captain #056 stated, *“I would have a beer with everybody in this room if it were up to me.”*

Several Marines described relationship repair strategies using the “grab a beer” construct to connote the informal, more friendly social space. Major #426, discussing the physical and mental strength of

division engineers, offered, *“They can get into fights and the next day they can drink with each other, and it’s not a big deal.”* Again, of interest, is the referent selected and how the major used it to connote social repair and strength. Captain #700 used the same construct with the following: *“if something does come up that I disagree with you on, you know, I’m not gonna- I’d either just say, ‘Ahh, you know, we can talk about it later or, you know, grab a beer or something.’ I’d talk to you.”*

The Marines used alcohol, and a specific way to talk about alcohol, as a way to communicate cohesion-building practices and to affirm strong personal relationships. In these narratives, alcohol’s presence is a positive indicator of social bonding and is carefully curated through the use of a particular construct. While not unique to the Marine Corps, it sketches a positive image of alcohol and displays a controlled, reasoned relationship. This is contrasted with the way Marines described bad behavior.

Behavior: Alcohol as the “go-to” negative example for behavior

Marines also employed alcohol-specific language to convey excess or negative behavior and typically as the go-to frame when seeking to provide a negative example of behavior. Words like “drunk” and “DUI” convey a different sentiment, one that suggests excess and a loss of control that has gone beyond the mild ‘loss of control’ framing in the “grab the beer” construct and has turned ugly and dangerous. Sergeant #308 described a *“shitbag Marine”* as one who *“drink[s] a lot”*, among other things. Chief Warrant Officer #023 stated, *“Perhaps we do a lot of things improperly just to appease people’s feelings. Okay, because one Marine got a DUI, does the entire base need to get DUI classes?”* Private First Class #039 does the same thing, saying *“Let’s say they broke their restriction and they left, came back the next morning, and you found out they were drinking. They were of age, but they were drinking on restriction.”* As does Sergeant #50, *“There’s always that one sergeant that is almost like a celebrity in their work section, but they’re not doing anything crazy. They’re not drinking ‘til their eyes black out.”* Like Sergeant #50, Captain #015’s account frames the alcohol-related behavior as bad and uses it to contrast with what is a good Marine. He stated, *“From my personal experience, a Marine who is spending their off-duty hours going to school and challenging themselves, they are not the Marine who’s going to get a DUI.”* Lieutenant Colonel #302, when describing what he needs in aircraft maintainers, stated, *“I need technical experts, and I need those technical experts to not be drunks”*, among other things. These Marines could have selected other referents for their examples, but over and over again, alcohol was selected as the example of negative behavior⁷.

Marines also linked bad leadership and being a bad Marine with specifically constructed language involving alcohol. In Corporal #040’s words, the social use of alcohol language is changed from “grab a beer” to “going out drinking” to evoke a different, negative meaning of excess and irresponsibility, which supports her description of bad leadership.

Like if you go up to them and say, as a PFC to their male corporal, “Hey, I’m gonna buy a car this weekend. Could you go with me to make sure that I have the proper documentation, insurance rates, things like that? I need help and guidance,” and they’re like, “Oh, I’m going out drinking this weekend. I don’t have time.”, they need to show it in their actions that they actually do care about you and they will take the time to help you.

First Lieutenant #307 uses the same imagery to describe a bad Marine. *“Again, true professionals, true war-fighters have self-control. They put the unit before themselves. They aren’t selfish to the point where like, ‘Hey, I’m getting hammered tonight. Screw the rest of you’ type of thing.”* She then carries that over to bad leadership, speaking hypothetically as a sergeant, *“Well, I can get hammered and totally wasted,*

⁷ The other common referent was “beat their wives.”

and somebody else will take care of my Marines,' which is usually the case, but still, there's that responsibility that they're like, 'Oh, well, I'm not responsible if I start drinking.'" This loss of control contests the Marine image of a controlled, composed warrior and the narrative of responsibility for one's Marines. Master Gunnery Sergeant #321 explained to those starting their careers as Marine officers, *"You have to step up your game and be that much more mature. You can't be the college graduate, frat boy drunk."* Again, alcohol is used in a way to depict irresponsibility and excess. This language construct subtly stigmatizes alcohol excesses, breaking the link between good Marine and the debauched Marine.

Identity: Construction of collective future self through their own words

These Marines through their stories, perceptions, and experiences paint a complex picture of how alcohol intersects with Marine identity. They segregate good and bad uses of alcohol and alcohol-related behavior and challenge the blind allegiance to 'Marine are drinkers' construct. There is enough evidence in this dataset to prompt further investigation into this and to offer institutional opportunity to construct a different narrative to envision an evolved collective future self.

Specific issues raised by participants in relationship to alcohol

Marines also raised alcohol-related issues that challenge their ability as leaders and interpersonal relationships.

Issue: Reliance on the safety brief – why?

The first issue is the safety briefs that unit leaders are to deliver on Fridays and before holidays to preempt individual negative behavior. Participants talked about these a lot, mostly discussing how ineffective they are. Discussing the various training requirements for alcohol, suicide, drug abuse, etcetera, Captain #523 explained,

It seems like a lot of the training that we do is more CYA⁸. We do it to say we've done it, but are we really actually making a change? It's kinda like we're just trying to put a Band-Aid on something without actually addressing the actual issue. So it's like, "yeah, but we tell them. We tell them." But you know what? The simple fact of the matter is you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. But then we're not really doing anything to move Marines in a direction or the Marine Corps for that matter culturally with respect to alcohol, even just as a single issue, to actually effect a change.

Gunnery Sergeant #001 stated, *"How many times are Marines told, 'Don't drink and drive?' But they still come back to work with DWIs or DUIs. 'I just told you Friday, 'Drink responsibly and don't drive and drink or drink and drive. But yet we're standing right here, right now because you decided to drink and drive.'"* Captain #642 noted, after talking about the "check in the box" Friday liberty briefs, *"I guarantee you that the Marine is not gonna- right before they make that bad decision to get in their car, they're not gonna be like, 'Oh, wait, I signed this paper, and on the paper I made a promise or pledge to my unit that I'm not supposed to drink and drive. So let me change my mind. I was gonna drink and drive, but now, I'm not gonna drive because of that piece of paper' or whatever. I don't buy that."*

Other Marines also commented on the "check in the box" nature of the safety briefs. 1st Lieutenant #507 in a focus group on MCB Camp Pendleton pointed out, *"The only time I see some of my company*

⁸ Cover your ass.

commanders and higher leaders is during a safety brief. 'Hey, Marines, don't drink and drive. Have a good weekend.' Boom, I checked my box." Captain #230 noted, "So in the Marine Corps, we have a lot of things that are like check in the box. That's my number one issue. ... I have to give a safety brief to my Marines. So when the Marine goes on the weekend, I say, 'Hey, don't drive drunk. Don't do this. Wear a condom. Blah, blah, blah.' And they don't." The check in the box nature of safety briefs leads many to question their function, as Captain #523's comments point to. Captain #642 from above sees the use of the safety brief as leadership self-protection. "[T]here's a lot of leaders, I think, that they push the paperwork down because they want to legally be covered to make sure that, if something does happen, they can say, 'I gave the safety brief. I made them fill out this paperwork. So, therefore, don't come to me.'" Major #126 raised a diversity of issues in his comments – the check in the box, lack of trust, lack of personal accountability, and the ineffective method for addressing problems.

We're very bureaucracy-centric. We're very check-in-the box centric. I was amazed and disappointed, the first time I got to my first unit, and the first Friday, we had to give 'em a safety brief. And I didn't understand what a safety brief was. Until I saw my, you know, my chief give his, which was basically "it's Friday, it's the weekend. Don't drink and drive. Don't drive and drink. Don't have unprotected sex. Don't rape anyone." And I was amazed that America's premier fighting force doesn't trust its own members to be away from work for two days without sitting them down for an hour to remind them of all the things they already know they shouldn't be doing. And if I was a lance corporal, that wouldn't mean anything to me. It would just be another like impediment to the end of my day and the start of my weekend. "I have to sit here and wait for somebody to tell me something I already know not to do." Whereas, in my view as Marines, we're supposed to already inherently- it's supposed to be internalized, that's part of the Marine image, psyche, whatever, like that we don't rape people, that we don't kill people we're not supposed to kill, that we don't steal, that we don't do drugs, that we don't drink and drive and run over, you know, orphans or whatever. But the fact that we are compelled by our leadership to sit our Marines down every Friday and remind them of things that they should already know, and that because we do it every Friday, and Marines always expect it, it becomes a check in the box, "Did you give them the safety brief?" "Yes." "Is that going to change Lance Corporal 'Imbecile' from making imbecilic decisions?" No! He's an imbecile. He's going to make imbecilic decisions. But we can say, after the fact, "Yes, I told him not to rape that woman, and he did it anyway so..." Like what difference does it make? He still committed the crime. He still did something wrong. He's still not worthy of being a Marine because he did something stupid. The safety brief doesn't change that. And that mentality and that- the thing that makes us want to give safety briefs is, to me, indicative of a lot of the shortcomings of the Marine Corps.

The exchange between two SNCOs in a MCB Camp Pendleton focus group points to the challenge with blanket requirements and how they convey a lack of trust.

1stSgt #118: I think training people on common sense things is- ... like it just on the whole makes people mad. Like, "give me another class this year about how I should not rape people, about how I shouldn't drink and drive, how I shouldn't do drugs."

MSgt #119: How I shouldn't smoke, when I've never smoked. Exactly.

1stSgt #118: It just seems like the Marine Corps in general doesn't trust us and thinks literally ... that we're stupid. And I think that's like a feeling I get all the time, and I'm like, "oh my god. These are- like the people in charge of me really think that I'm like a blundering idiot. Like, "Gah, I didn't know I couldn't rape people. Aw, I couldn't give her any drugs."

MSgt #119: I think it's just a check in the box thing, I think. It's like they don't care whether or not you're stupid or smart, but if you rape somebody, they want to be like, "Well, it's not my fault because I gave them this class." ... I mean, it's like the 'covering your ass' mentality, I guess.

These comments raise the question as to why the Marine Corps continues to use the safety brief. Marine after Marine expresses dissatisfaction with the method and points to its ineffectiveness in curbing problematic behavior. Marines become immune to the words because of repetition. Others express frustration at being subjected to these briefs that waste their time. Others are frustrated because they think these briefings signal a lack of trust or reveal a self-interested leadership. If the original intent was to demonstrate leadership taking care of their own, it is failing. Marines do not see authentic care but leadership acting in self-interest. If it was to inform behavior, it is failing. Marines do not see how the briefings over-ride individual agency. If it is to easily signal action to institutional process and external audiences, it is working, as leaders just check the box to demonstrate compliance.

Issue: Demographics – It's a junior issue

The Marine Corps is no different than other spaces that have a preponderance of young people living together. Alcohol is an issue. Participants discussed the prevalence of drinking among junior Marines, the 17- to 20-year olds. As they are "*freshly out of high school, ... they want to go and get crazy*".⁹ Several Marines discussed the expected immaturity in this age group. An older private first class put the situation in context when he said,

[Y]ou have a lot of immaturity, especially with younger Marines. I had a very nice safety net in college because it was college and I had my family and whatnot. So I got my immaturity out in a more safe environment. But I think it is silly for the Marine Corps to expect these very mature kinds of decisions to be made when you give an 18-year-old free range on the weekends with bars and strip clubs and all that stuff in town, which is not fair to say that to the Marine Corps because it's not their fault. It's not the Marine Corps' fault. It's not the officers' fault. It's not the policy makers' fault. But I do think it's a difficult process to expect mature decisions to be made from 18, 19, 20-year-olds who are very immature, I guess. ... Because people know like don't drink and drive or don't drink underage and get caught. I think people understand that, but then when you actually have like four or five 18-year-olds go out to like Jacksonville downtown, like things are going to happen.¹⁰

Captain #056 agreed, "*there's a lot of challenges in doing stuff like [General Bohm's program to counter drinking at Expeditionary Warfare School] with younger Marines probably because of the maturity level, probably 'cause the intelligence stuff and certain things, character development hasn't really quite made it there to that developmental level.*"

These immature people are seeking acceptance into a new social environment that is comprised of mixed age groups. Captain #014 explained,

What's hard too is alcohol is very big in the Marines Corp culture. It's highly accepted, even though we have from higher headquarters pushing down it's wrong. What I think is hard is you have these young Marines doing the Marine Corps. There's a social structure. So, I have higher Marines living in the same barracks as I do. And I want to fit in, and 'oh, there's alcohol!', you know, and that's all they talk about, especially the young Marines. I think the reason why it's like that is like these Marines, 18, 19, would have been in college, and that's the same kind of dynamics as it is in college.

⁹ Corporal #266.

¹⁰ Private First Class #021.

You have the higher, the seniors and the juniors, really not pressuring people to drink. It's just the thing to do. And ... now you have in the Marine Corps a social structure. So not only are they like the senior and junior equivalent, but they are literally my NCOs and above. So, if it's important to them to drink and that's all they talk about, I want to fit in, you know. This is the cool thing to do.

Staff Sergeant #635 agreed,

Drinking is the number one for the young age between 17 to 20, 22, 23 ... tattoo, same thing. But when I came in late, so I don't have to do all those stuff. I don't have to drink, do that, or whatever to show them, "Hey, I can drink or tattoo all over my body" to fit in. ... The maturity but- it's the young age group, the entry level, that's how they try to fit in. I mean the alcohol is the number one, tattoo is the number two, maybe.

Second Lieutenant #037 added his personal experience as a new lieutenant.

From what I've seen from some of the younger enlisted Marines that I've talked to, they feel-and I've talked to the ones that are okay with a more lewd lifestyle and the ones that are brought up in a fairly conservative home. The ones that have been brought up fairly conservatively, they feel pressure to drink, to go out to strip clubs. I felt that pressure to a small extent at TBS, and I can only imagine what, since I get to leave work at the end of the day, I can't imagine what these PFCs and those corporals are feeling when their entire peer group is engaging in this and promoting these ideas.

Another participant from that same focus group, 1st Lieutenant #036, discussed the influence of senior Marines' behavior on the junior Marines. He observed, *"I mean, it's a cultural thing. I can't say how many Marines I've seen that came in and ... they've never dipped, they've never smoked or drank, and then they come to the Marine Corps, and they do it now because that's what their seniors do, and they want to be like that. They think it looks hard."* It enacts the storied image contested by these narratives.

Participants recognized the role maturity plays in tempering this youthful excess. In a staff non-commissioned officer (SNCO) focus group in Twentynine Palms, several Marines discussed this issue.

Staff Sergeant #632 noted,

I see that as a maturity- because me individually, I wasn't pressured to drink when I joined the Marine Corps. I didn't drink as much. I still don't drink as much, but I think it's a maturity thing. Maybe it's a way for them to fit in, but the ones that are usually mature, whether they're 19, 18, 17, they don't feel pressured for that. They can benefit from the Marine Corps without drinking. I've seen guys like that all the time.

Staff Sergeant #627 responded, saying younger Marines *"have to be confident at that early stage too and back themselves up if they don't want to drink. I also grew up in an environment where I did have a buddy that wanted me to drink a lot, all the time, but I was more mature to say no."* First Sergeant #626 agreed it has to do with maturity level and also pointed out the limited entertainment options available to younger Marines and how that impacts their choices.

I think it also has to do like just overall resource availability. As you're younger, you really don't have access to different things, whether it be automobiles, money to go out in town to do extracurricular activities. So you kind of fall into the realm of what's available to you. And obviously, if they're not leaving the barracks, they have access to alcohol. So, they just hang in- hangout internally and then party out there. So, when it comes to fitting in, you know, I don't know. I just think it has to do with the- with access. So, the drinking is- you see a lot of it at an earlier age. But once you start to either move out of barracks, you get a little bit older, your priorities start to shift and your just responsibilities shift, and so you don't even consider alcohol anymore. And I think that's when the maturity continues to develop within the individual. You just kind of want to drink, drink. You don't

want to drink, good on ya. It doesn't matter. But at the earlier age because that's all they have, uh, I think that's why they probably drink more often.

In an interview on MCB Camp Pendleton, Sergeant #611 explained how she has grown up in rank and responsibility and how that has helped her with alcohol-laden social environments.

I don't really drink that much. I'm more mature now. I've grown up through the ranks. So I understand that like, if my Marine needs me, I have to be able go get them. And then plus, I have a son and a husband, so I've got to be there for them as well. ... I just have self-control to where I don't get carried away. If everybody's like "drink, drink, drink," I'm mature enough to like, "no, I'm not going to do that right now." Or if they¹¹ do drink, then I'm mature enough to be like, "okay, let me make sure I have somebody to drive me back before I start drinking. Let me make sure that I give my keys away so that I have all this time to sober up before I get back in my car."

The description of the issue as largely a junior Marine problem is not surprising, given the Marine Corps' demographics, nor is the mediating impact of maturity. When maturity is absent, Marines discussed the need for an empathetic leadership response that seeks to shepherd or grow these young Marines – or at least the ones deemed worthy to save – instead of throwing the book at them. 23-year old Private First Class #021 explained, "You can do stupid things, immature, illegal, underage drinking, whatever, but you always need to have like a captain or a platoon sergeant or someone be there to say, 'okay, you got in a bar fight. How do we handle this?'"

Approaching these situations with a growing mindset as a leader resonated with many participants. Lieutenant Colonel #618, recognizing young people are going to make bad decisions like drinking underage or breaking curfew, noted, "[T]hey're kids. They're 18 to 24, they're not perfect, they're going to do dumb things that I did in college. ... I didn't get expelled from college. I was not valedictorian. Somewhere in between there, we can live with, and we can hold them accountable. We can save them. We can mold them and mentor them and train them. They're not necessarily boy scouts." Sergeant #140 offered his experience with how this worked out in his command.

There are commanders who are willing to help the Marines out versus immediately going towards that NJP mentality. Like my last battalion I watched- like the first command, alcohol-related incidents were- that's immediately- they went to NJP. And then the command switched, and they started helping the Marines out, and all the alcohol-related incidents just like dropped. ... We started getting more 72s because we had no alcohol-related incidents. And you even see it in Marines. They're not doing dumb things anymore because they're getting the help that they needed.

Leveraging a storied Marine, Chesty Puller, Sergeant #050 commented on why he felt Chesty was so successful as a leader, noting his willingness to recognize youthful dumbness and help them to grow from it.

Good order and discipline is- it is what it is. We all abide by it. But again, we also know that hey, the speed limit says 25, but I'm driving 28-29. There's no qualm. The cops aren't going to pull me over for that. But if I'm going 40-50, then yes, by all means. People- we live in a world of gray. There's a lot of things that are black and white. But truth of the matter is, and like I said, Chesty Puller got NJP'd two times [for insubordination], man. But there was a reason why he was able to take care of his Marines. Because sometimes he was willing to turn the other cheek or bend the rules a little bit, take care of that Marine. Because again, we all know that there is a Marine in the barracks

¹¹ In review of the audio-recording, participant did state "they." However, based on context, she most likely meant "I."

underage drinking. We all know that, and you should be NJP'd for integrity violation if you feel as though that's not the case. But truth of the matter is, it's not that we don't care. It's just how am I going to take care of that Marine? That's what the problem that a lot of people have kind of strayed away from, and like I said, Semper Paratus, that CYA, is becoming more of a problem because now your leadership is like "Oh, fuck. [sighs] What did Billy¹² do now? What did lance criminal what's his face do now? I've got to do all this paperwork." Truth of the matter is if you just kind of build a culture of like, hey, we are a family here.

When someone is worth saving, meaning a good Marine who has made a mistake, participants talked about the need to work with them, give them a chance, and allow them to learn, even if it was contrary "to the book." Colonel #617, when talking about underage and immature drinking, explained that zero tolerance and a legalistic approach do not work. "That just nukes them for when they do something wrong."

Issue: The Challenge of Illegality – The lines for DUIs are clearer than for underage drinking

Many participants struggled over how leaders should handle the illegality and career implications of alcohol-related crimes. Marines know what's wrong legally regarding alcohol, as Chief Warrant Officer #017 pointed out, "Everybody knows what's right and what's wrong, like drinking and driving, getting in a fight with the wife, underage drinking." However, participants separated out underage drinking from drinking and driving. For that latter, participants for the most part agreed to its being a line in the sand issue. Speaking about drunk driving, Gunnery Sergeant #054 stated bluntly, "If you get caught, you're going to get the hammer, rightfully so." When Marines are caught drunk driving, leaders' available responses are more limited, so there is less ambiguity as to what they should do. Master Sergeant #641 put it succinctly, "blatant criminal acts, you know, DUI, drug use, those are ... black and white, like straight to NJP, straight to court-martial, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200. There's no if, ands, or buts about those. Those are easy." Sergeant #222 agreed, "If they get a DUI or something like that, yeah, my hands are tied. I can't do anything." The Marine Corps has set procedures for this.

But even then, leaders struggle because of the finality of those procedures on the individual's career. Comparing the model Marine who screwed up with a DUI to a Marine with a habitual bad attitude, Major #101 recognizes the Marine's humanity and the challenge for a leader to discern what's best for the unit and the Marine Corps as a whole. Responding to the question, what makes a bad Marine bad, Major #101 framed his discussion around alcohol-related behavior and stated,

I think habit, I guess, would be my answer. Habit. Because how many have had like good Marines had a DUI? Like I can't believe that happens, that it's one of my best Marines. I cannot believe it. ... by no means am I making excuses for that sort of behavior, but I sure as hell don't have one. But we are human after all. So I think ... what we're trying to define as bad is somebody who consistently defines themselves that way by their behavior. I mean, like he said¹³, I agree. Do you want to deal with that one Marine, you know, that- that one-time offender, you know, though DUI is a serious offense, or that perpetual offender, that Marine who's making poor decisions on a daily basis and affecting the morale and cohesiveness of the unit? So I guess habit.

While it is a cut and dry offense, a few leaders found themselves conflicted as to how to respond at times. Some chose alternate routes, as Gunnery Sergeant #036 illustrated, "Like NJP, the Marine Corps is

¹² Speaking generically.

¹³ The Marine was participating in an all-male focus group and could be referencing either Captain #102 or Captain #104. Both captains noted that the hardest Marines to deal with are those with bad attitudes right before Major #101 offered with his thoughts on the subject.

giving them, 'You know what? You've got a DUI, but we're gonna send you to counselling. Now, we're going to rehabilitate you. ... it works. I've seen it.' However, participants more often recounted that leaders enacted the expected punishments for DUIs unless they told of instances of favoritism¹⁴.

With underage drinking, it was a different story. Marines know underage drinking is illegal, but participants also saw participating in that as a part of the maturation process. As Sergeant #50 pointed out above, *"We all know that there is a Marine in the barracks underage drinking. We all know that."* Private First Class #021 as well stated above, *"[P]eople know like ... don't drink underage and get caught."* As a line in the sand issue, it is more ambiguous, and leaders are more hesitant to "nuke" Marines' careers over it and get *"rid of some really good people that could have maybe been rehabilitated"*¹⁵. First Lieutenant #507 described how he speaks frankly about underage drinking with his incoming Marines.

I tell them ... all the Marines a kind of a funny story about underage drinking during that inbound platoon. I tell them stuff like, "what we all personally think about, 'hey, if you're old enough to die, you should be able to drink for your country, blah, blah, blah.' That is irrelevant! I mean, we could sit here and debate that all day long. But there is a Marine Corps order. There is a law. I mean, there's things that- we don't get to pick and choose what orders we can follow whether it's a law or whether it's a Marine Corps order. So. What we all personally think about like, 'Hey, I'm 20. Like why can't I have a beer?' Like, I mean, that's neither here or there." But I always tell them- and I tell them, don't- I give them the disclaimer, don't- "this isn't the company commander saying that you can drink alcohol underage." But what I'm saying is like, "it's never 'Hey, I'm just playing PlayStation, minding my own business, and drinking a beer by myself. And-and somebody like busted into my room and, 'oh! You're underage! Boom! You're getting NJP'd.' It never happens that way." I tell them, "it's-it's, you're somewhere, you're in a group, you start drinking, somebody says, 'Hey, watch this!' They jump off the third deck, you know, or hey, God forbid, someone gets assaulted, a young lady, a young man, somebody. Something-something else comes up, and the onion starts getting peeled back. 'Oh, really? Who was there?' 'Oh, really? Who was drinking?' 'Oh really? How old are you?'" And that's what I tell the Marines. I go, "You guys gotta understand that." I go, "You guys, you're going to make whatever decisions you make. You're 20 years old. You're one year away from being able to drink. Obviously, it's pretty easy for you to get ahold of alcohol. Like, I mean, I'm not blind to that. But you have a choice to make. And it's your choice at the end of the day." And they just kind of laugh, and when I tell em' like, "Yeah, no one ever just busts in your room and you're sitting there minding your own business, drinking one beer. That never happens." I go, "It never happens." I'm not saying to do that! You know. I tell them, I go, "but what I'm saying is that's not how it ever plays out," you know? ... Because I always tell them like "Hey, smart people learn from their mistakes, and geniuses learn from others' mistakes," you know? And that's what I'm trying to tell. Like "I'm not here talking to you just to talk to you. ... I could be doing a lot of million other things right now. ... But I don't care about that right now. I care about talking to you and making sure that you remember this. And hopefully, when push comes to shove and you're in a crossroads and left is the wrong thing to do and right is the right thing to do, you decide to go the right way. Or you hear your company commander, or your platoon commander, or whatever like in your ear, like the good angel. I'm hoping-" That's what happens in my fantasy world. That's what I think. [Interviewer chuckling] I hope that the Marine is about to get

¹⁴ For example, Lance Corporal #060 provided her perception of what happened to a gunnery sergeant who got pulled over for a DUI, *"gets arrested. ... Nothing comes of it. He didn't- no repercussions. Nothing. Kept his rank, kept his job, and all they did was just transfer him units."* She attributed this to playing politics in the Marine Corps.

¹⁵ Captain #642.

*in his car, and he's drunk, and he's about to put his keys, and he remembers Lieutenant So and So.
[sighs]*

This first lieutenant, like Major #126 before, sees the need for personal accountability. At the end of the day, it is the individual Marine who decides what to do at the pivotal moment. And people are going to make mistakes. As Lieutenant Colonel #512 pointed out, *"We're always gonna have people that are gonna break the rules."*

It then falls on leaders to discern intent and remorse, which is hard. Participants explained that there are some Marines who just do not care. *"We have so many bad apples, too, that just don't give a damn. Look at our reports on people who get caught with DUIs, people who get caught beating their wives, beating their kids. Just because they're Marines doesn't mean it stops,"* stated First Lieutenant #045. For those, leaders are trying to find the quickest way to separation. However, they recognized that there are others who do care but have made a mistake, maybe intentionally, maybe due to youth. In them, they saw opportunity for change. Captain #401 talked of one of his top performers who made a mistake and bounced back. He described, *"One of my top performers, he had a misstep. He had a DUI when he was a corporal. He got busted down, but he recovered from it. ... Now he's doing really well out in San Diego. I still talk to him actually. Eight years as a sergeant, in the reserves now."* How leaders welcome them back into the fold informs unit and individual growth. Staff Sergeant #327 recounted an experience with a particularly influential commander, speaking specifically to the fact that this commander did not give the typical safety brief admonitions about alcohol and driving and that he used an empathetic stance toward the unit and individual.

I experienced leaders that are really good at that [setting the tone], and it was to the point where he could stand in front of the battalion and go, "I want you guys to know this. I love every single one of you like my kids." But, of course, that's something in Marine Corps when you do that, it's like, "Eh. You just told them you loved them." You can't be doing that, right [interviewer chuckles], because of this macho persona. But it takes a lot for somebody to say that. ... [T]hen the same commander, if somebody messed up in the unit, he didn't say, "My leadership failed." He said, "Guys, look, one of our brothers did something. I don't know. But we still love them. For the rest of you doing a good job, keep doing a good job. And let's press." And that's what we did. Without the 'Don't get in trouble. Don't drink and drive. Don't-' and we went 320 days without a liberty incident.

This commander did not excuse the behavior, holding that individual accountable, and at the same time recognized this person's humanity and belonging in the group. He also rewarded those doing right by praising their effort and not belittling them with the "don't drink and drive" spiel when they were not engaging in the action to begin with.

Issue: Obstacles in the "grabbing a beer" informal social space

The Marine Corps relies on strong cohesion within units to carry out its various missions. As discussed above, Marines talked about cohesion-building practices leveraging the "grab a beer" construct. Also, using that same language, Marines described how gender and rank considerations limited their access to this informal space, informed their ability to participate in cohesion-building practices, or complicated their ability to form or further relationships in informal spaces. For rank, they also discussed how such barriers also preserved leadership ability to lead and avoid the traps of fraternization.

For women, this informal space is not as widely available as it is for men. There are physical dangers of this space when alcohol is present, which will not be addressed here. Beyond that, there are barriers to women's ability to access and use the space that are specific to being female. First Sergeant #220

explained, *"I would be extremely hesitant to say, 'Hey, guys, let's go grab some beers this week, this Friday.'" Her concern centered on spousal (female) perception of her presence in what is perceived to be a normal social space for Marines. Many women described these same barriers. Captain #230 described how male Marines would try to build camaraderie and how, as a woman and mother, she had different factors to consider that limited how she could use that social space. "There's a, 'Oh, let's go to the club and have a beer.' 'No, I have to go to daycare and pick up my children. Oh, yes. We both work in my family.' ... [T]here's a lot of the male like, 'I have- my wife stays home and takes care of my kids, and they go to private school.' And, you know, especially on the officer side."* In a male focus group, Sergeant #132 discussed how women do not have the same ability to use this informal space. *"For men, we'll go gather up. A lot of us will drink and get together, and- but for women, they don't have that, like their female friends with them, because there are no other females."* Captain #006 showed how rank and gender considerations intersect in this informal social space, again, referencing alcohol.

So if I'm the staff sergeant who is the platoon sergeant for the 0302¹⁶ female lieutenant, I want to make sure that it's a very clear professional relationship ... this happens sometimes in different units where the platoon sergeant and the platoon commander go out and get beers and have a maybe more close relationship than they should. Probably less appropriate for that to be a female and a male because of the, again, the perception that might come of it. That's not something I agree with anyway – but the staff sergeants and the lieutenants run around getting drunk together, but it does happen, and that would probably create more issues being a mixed gender pair as opposed to two males or two females.

Other Marines also discussed rank barriers to and challenges within the informal social space with alcohol as the referent, particularly when it comes to lance corporals advancing to corporals and the social impact of that move. For example, Lance Corporal #261 discussed how junior Marines, as they advance in rank, lose access to their friends. He explained, *"I feel like when lances pick up corporal, I mean, they try to act like other corporals, but they want to be accepted by the NCO community 'cause now they can't really chill with us. Like maybe last week, I mean, we were out at Samurai's drinking or whatever, and then now, it's like we can't chill."* Additionally, Lance Corporal #624 described this rank challenge also through the lens of alcohol.

Or like drinking. 'Cause a lot of NCOs are – like the higher ups – give the drinks to the people that they've known for a long time. So, if a corporal has been best friends with a lance since they've been like- for a long time, obviously, that corporal's gonna help that lance out. 'Cause they've been buddies since before. So why don't you just separate them [in the barracks]? ... But, at that same time, ... once a lance corporal is now a corporal and then all the rest of their friends are still lances, they're stuck with corporals that they don't know or they haven't been with.

Additionally, other Marines discussed how, as leaders, they would not access this informal space with Marines junior in rank because, besides being against policy, it could cloud their ability to form and reform their Marines. Master Sergeant #643 explained how she kept firm boundaries defined by rank to maintain her leadership role.

The junior Marines, it's like they come and ask me, "master sergeant, would you want like to come and join us?" And stuff like that. And I basically tell them, "you know I don't do those stuff," or I don't do- like they play the- ... they just opened the laser tag thing. [slight pause] No way. I just don't feel like I should be at that level with them. Maybe they're looking out for me to be there. But sometimes, they don't know- if you give them the hand, they'll go up to your neck and they go up all the way. And then, ... they get it confused. They're not at that level yet where, "Hey, this is just a

¹⁶ An infantry MOS.

one-time fun stuff.” But then, I’m going to have to counsel you because you are not doing well at work and you’re gonna get a worse, you know, pros and cons mark and everything. And they’re gonna be like, “Whoa, you just played laser tag with us!” You know? So, it creates confusion in my opinion. I think that that’s why we have sergeants and staff sergeants, maybe, can go with them. But a master sergeant? I don’t think it’s the time and place. I think it will be Family Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas Dinner in the command, yes. But me go hang out and have a beer with my junior Marines? I don’t see it a place.

Master Gunnery Sergeant #231 also described rank impact on social relations and leadership responsibilities.

You can’t be like buddies. I mean, with people like your own peer group, yeah, but I can’t be like buddies with like people below my rank. ... then you’re going to lose all the respect, and ... it would cloud your judgment to make a decision because sometimes you have to make decisions that not everyone likes. You know, then if someone’s like your buddy or whatever, then you’re like, “Oh, well, I know they’re wrong, but, you know, since they’re my drinking buddy, I’m probably going to have to just like let them get away with something.” And I’d probably feel bad about that.

Sergeant #403 saw the need, however, to sometimes challenge those barriers to deepen unit cohesion and to grow his Marines ever after they have gone to other units.

But that doesn’t happen without that kind of unit cohesion and breaking apart those barriers. We used to act like a SCIF¹⁷ back in my old unit where I just put a box out, and that’s where everybody’s cell phone went, and they’d sit in there, and we’d just talk, play beer pong, let it be acceptable, but there’s nothing wrong with me and the corporals or me and- we call it fraternization because in our rank structures or mixing, but what is the difference between me and Lance Corporal F¹⁸? I’m older. He could have had a harder life, he could have had a different outlook, he could have had many different things happen to him, but what’s the difference? There is really nothing other than the fact that- as some would put it, my parents fucked before his did. You know, he’s less experienced, but instead of where like, “I’m bigger, I’m badder than you are.” Instead of, “hey, come here let’s teach you up. Let’s get you up where I am.” And let’s continue this relationship even when we’re not together, that way if you have questions, you feel comfortable asking me.

Those who discussed this largely did not agree with Sergeant #403, however, and saw a need to keep the boundaries clear to avoid not only impropriety and order violation but also a degradation of leadership respect and the more serious problems that can emerge with the intersection of alcohol, sex, and rank structure. Lance Corporal #624 provided, from a junior Marine perspective, how such behavior challenged her respect in her leadership.

I remember one day like one of our gunnies came and took shots with the junior Marines. And like, we were just like, “Whoa!” And he was still in cammies. We were like ... “I understand it’s on Friday night, but aren’t you supposed to go home to your wife?” ... And so, it’s just- it’s kinda hard to like get the respect or to see them as like a mentor or a role model or something you want to be with if they do these dumb things.

Major #426 also offered, “And so I had sergeants that were – when I got into the unit – sergeants that had taken PFCs out drinking. Male, female. And there was issues there that occurred. And there were sexual assault allegations that occurred. ... [H]owever it played out, that sergeant should never have even thought of taking a PFC out to drink—male or female—but he did.”

This conversation points out how alcohol is nested in the social and professional relationship deliberations of Marines within informal social spaces. The sense of trust conveyed by the “grab the

¹⁷ Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility.

¹⁸ Referring to a generic lance corporal.

beer” construct is challenged by the sex and rank considerations Marines raised. Some barriers are exclusionary, some impede the cohesion-building practices, and others maintain authority and the ability to lead. There are times when Marines decide to blur the boundaries, but others caution that doing so is risky because it can lead them from the “grab the beer” construct to the other – the symbol of bad behavior – quite quickly. It is imperative for leaders and individual Marines to understand and be mindful of the role alcohol plays both in the language and in the lived experiences of Marines and within the Marine Corps.

Conclusion – some points to ponder

When we initiated this analysis, we anticipated that it would be a quick dive into the data to capture various incidents of wrong-doing involving alcohol and alcohol abuse. It was not an explicit question area; however, due to the exploratory nature of the research design, Marines were able to address the larger, less constrained questions about leadership, cohesion, and gender bias in ways that were meaningful to them. And many of them chose to discuss them through the lens of alcohol. This shows the strength of alcohol in the lived experience of Marines, and their words and experiences display the complex ways Marines choose to interact with alcohol or not.

- Participants identified with the tough, wild image. Some were challenged by it, as they saw the downsides to and limitations of it. Some did not ascribe to that image, seeing it as immature or contrary to what being a Marine is. Yet they are all Marines. How can the institution leverage the diversity of this identity to challenge the collective belief¹⁹ that Marines are drinkers, *fait accompli*? This identity factor, while pervasive, is also fragile.
- Participants questioned the institutional practices that contradict institutional policy, which offers the institution an opportunity to reframe the narratives and behaviors around both.
- Many participants did not feel the safety brief is an effective tool in shaping alcohol-related behavior. Yet it is still used. A few recognized the need for it or such a tool. Its continued use is breeding discontent with leadership as many see it more as a CYA tool than as a way to connect meaningfully with their Marines. The Marine Corps may want to reevaluate the rationale for its use and consider alternate or additional ways to inform individual agency.
- Many participants recognized the immaturity of the majority of their population and how that leads to poor decision-making and potential unit and long-term career impacts. They discussed seeking a more compassionate approach when it comes to underage drinking and a more effective institutional practice to instill values and shape behavior their units than the safety briefs. Unfortunately, they recognized many of their solutions take leadership time, a limited resource. A counterargument to the time-sink of engaged leadership is the time-sink of handling the 10 percenters. Throughout the dataset, Marines lamented the amount of their time the bad apples, the 10 percenters, take and the drain they have on unit resources. Reorienting the thinking on this and rebalancing leadership time require a long-term versus short-term vision, a preventive versus reactive organizational and leadership stance. As this is contrary to U.S. practice and norms, this will take time and care to instill.
- And lastly, the participants displayed a healthy balance in their thinking about alcohol. It is a positive social practice when done in moderation, breeding cohesion and trust and offering a

¹⁹ As per Sudhinaraset, Wigglesworth, and Takeuchi, “Cultural norms and beliefs are strong predictors of both current drinking and frequent heavy drinking.” Sudhinaraset, May, PhD., Wigglesworth, Christina, M.S.W., L.C.S.W., and David T. Takeuchi PhD. 2016. “Social and Cultural Contexts of Alcohol use: Influences in a Social-Ecological Framework.” *Alcohol Research* 38 (1): E6.

relaxed social space, and represents negative behavior when enacted in excess or in lieu of responsibility. This is disrupted, of course, with youth; however, that is not particular to the Marine Corps. That is pervasive society wide. Recognizing that, the Marine Corps may want to take care in curating its practices, narratives, and leadership expectations to empower and promote leaders who ascribe to this balanced way of thinking and who are willing and able to mentor and mature their junior Marines who show potential despite their poor choices and to separate those who do not.

The insights participants offered can inform future organizational efforts to deepen understanding on individual and institutional relationships with alcohol, to devise and revise alcohol-related policies and practices, and to reframe narratives that are fundamental in helping Marines – of all ranks – internalize and enact institutional values.