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Alcohol Thought Paper on Ethics

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Abstract

The intent of this paper is to convey my thoughts and personal feelings on the subject of alcohol; it's availability on military installations, and the use of alcohol in a combat zone. For some people alcohol is a relaxing pastime, but for many, alcohol is the catalyst to their life's destruction. Alcohol (in my personal opinion) is arguably the most dangerous substance on the planet. Many substances will kill much quicker, but few are as legal, readily available, or inexpensive.

Introduction

Alcohol as the catalyst to one's self destruction is in itself merely the catalyst, not the cause. The Army does a fantastic job promoting a "temperance mentality" in regards to alcohol use and has over my twenty years backed away from the promotion and enabling acceptance of alcohol. It seems to me these changes have been more from an interest in preventing Soldiers from driving drunk or becoming intoxicated and assaulting their spouse than attacking the root cause of alcohol abuse which inevitably leads to alcohol related incidents.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) considers any motor vehicle accident alcohol related if at least one driver or non-occupant including pedestrians, or bicyclists has a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .01 grams per deciliter or higher. With that in mind the NHTSA reported 16,885 alcohol related fatalities in 2005. Of those 16,885 alcohol was present in 24% of the drivers of those vehicles. The 16,885 alcohol related fatalities in 2005 equates to one fatality every 31 minutes. There were also an estimated 254,000 persons injured in alcohol related crashes in 2005 which averages out to one injury every 2 minutes. Also in 2005 there were 414 children under the age of 14 killed in alcohol related crashes and an additional 48 were either pedestrians or riding their bicycles when they were killed by alcohol impaired drivers. As a side note there were 1,569 alcohol related fatalities in the state of Texas during the year 2005. There is an enormous amount of alcohol related statistical data published by dozens of research companies or academic institutes every year. They range from the economic impact in terms of dollars spent due to alcohol abuse, to violence, health, and of course as detailed earlier death. The last statistic I'll reference is one from the Marin Institute which claims an estimated 480,000 children are mistreated each year by a caretaker with alcohol

problems. I was unable to retrieve any alcohol related statistical data published by the Department of Defense or the Department of the Army to reference in this paper but with the staggering numbers above it's not needed because job occupation doesn't matter.

It at first seemed difficult to tie alcohol and ethics to the Army as an organization, but with Webster's defining ethics as the rules or standards of conduct governing the members of a profession it became clearer how I would approach the subject.

Pertaining to myself; I am a non drinker and have been for about fourteen years or so. I am not however, a "neo-prohibitionist" though I do espouse to some of their ideas or view points. There are as I have learned through the research of this paper an enormous amount of myths and mistruths pertaining to alcohol ranging from the false common knowledge that alcohol causes weight gain, to the idea that drinking alcohol for a long enough period of time will lead to one becoming an alcoholic.

Contrary to my previous belief "alcohol is not the devil." There is absolutely nothing wrong with mature adults of legal drinking age enjoying an alcoholic beverage. Problems do arise when one drinks to the point where their judgment is impaired and their actions have a negative impact on those around them.

I do not believe as the neo-prohibitionists do that we need to change our social norms to reduce the acceptability of drinking alcohol nor do I assume as many prohibitionists do that the availability of alcohol leads people to drink, or the amount of alcohol one consumes determines the extent of their drinking problem. I do agree with prohibitionists that alcohol education should focus on the problems excessive drinking can result in and that resolution to alcohol abuse lies in the root cause that leads one to use alcohol as their escape. I also see no problem

with promoting alcohol abstinence as the prohibitionist does. For every health benefit alcohol offers there are ten alternatives with far greater residual risk.

The Army has a tremendous support program for substance abuse and every leader I've served under has a genuine concern for taking care of their Soldiers and seeing that they get help for their problems. There really is no excuse for an alcohol related incident while serving in the Army because help is so readily available and free of cost. The few areas I'd like to see the Army improve in the prevention of alcohol related incidents no doubt would not be well received by the masses. I don't think the availability of alcohol (other than it being legal) factors into its abuse but the Army in my opinion should take the moral/ethical high ground and refrain from selling it on its installations. That a Soldier would have to drive an extra mile, and pay a few cents more in taxes for a case of beer or a bottle of Jack Daniels would not likely result in a decrease in DUIs, but for me it's the thought that counts. Would the Army be sending a message that it no longer considers alcohol socially acceptable? I don't know, but I wouldn't view it as a bad idea. The use of alcohol in the combat theatre is in my opinion fairly prevalent. Some leaders turn a blind eye to it with the attitude that a man should be able to have a drink if he's risking his life in combat. Other than stating that guns and alcohol don't mix I won't even touch the absurdity of alcohol in combat. General Order 1 tells us everything we need to know about the subject. The last few points I'd like to touch on is the definition of "a drinking problem" or "a problem drinker." In my opinion if your drinking alcohol has a negative impact on your life or anyone close to you, you have a drinking problem. Or more importantly you have personal issues that need to be addressed which will help avoid judgment errors while under the influence of alcohol. How many times does a Soldier need to show up late for work due to a late night drinking for it to be considered a problem? How many times does a Soldier need to report for

duty with alcohol on his breath for it to be considered a problem? The greater question is what is going on in his personal or professional life to allow for the error in judgment to drink so much as to report for duty in that condition? An ethical dilemma may not necessarily be geared toward a subordinate but a peer or superior who you suspect has a drinking problem. Do you approach him? The easy and most touted answer is yes. The reality is that you might make the attempt at an approach but if that attempt was without result would you take it higher for the Soldier's own good and the good of the unit?

Conclusion

There are a very few easy answers as to the who, what, where, when, and why of an alcohol related incident's root cause. If there is an ethical decision to be made leaders need to consider the welfare of the individual and the unit and direct those that they suspect for any reason may need help to get it.

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