

MAG-14 NCO Leadership Program

By Maj. Andrew East, USMC, and 1stLt. Samuel Monk, USMC

On Dec. 26 2003, two Marine Aircraft Group 14 (MAG-14) Marines were passengers in a car that was involved in an automobile accident. LCpl. Nathan Dodd, assigned to Marine Aviation Logistics Squadron 14 (MALS-14), was killed instantly, while Cpl. William Avant, assigned to Marine Attack Squadron 231 (VMA-231), was taken to a hospital in a coma and later succumbed to his injuries. In the aftermath of this accident, the commanding officer (CO), MAG-14 determined that a new approach to heighten safety awareness was needed, that the routine safety approach was not having the desired effect on our youngest Marines. He promised the Dodd family something good would come of this tragedy. That “something good” was creation of the noncommissioned officer (NCO) leadership program and the Nathan P. Dodd Leadership Award for NCO excellence and leadership.

A New Program

The MAG-14 team established and maintains this new and innovative NCO leadership program that directly supports our Marines through active mentoring provided by our NCOs. In May 2003, the MAG-14 CO created a focus group consisting of one field-grade officer, one company-grade officer, and eight Marine NCOs from within MAG-14. He turned to his NCOs because of their concern for our junior Marines and their close personal contact with them. As small unit leaders, they are in the best position to care for and mentor our youngest Marines, and they represent the strength of our Marine Corps.

The focus group determined the need for greater personal responsibility between a young Marine and a respected NCO from his shop or unit. Together, the focus group created a dynamic, relevant leadership program that engages NCO leadership to mentor our younger Marines. This program establishes a closer bond and higher level of personal responsibility between “a Marine and his fire team” during those periods when he is not in close contact with his unit’s leadership.

Using the Center for Naval Analyses study of Marine Corps accidental deaths, this active program enables our junior leadership to focus on our higher risk Marines. The leadership program requires that every unit select NCOs who have demonstrated maturity and leadership and designate them as mentors. The mentors are given a presentation and instruction regarding their role in the program, and they receive a packet titled “NCO’s Mission in Force Protection.”

Information in this packet includes the role of a leader, indicators that put Marines at risk, drinking and driving, and safe driving, as well as a copy of a message from the former Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., with the subject, “Marines Don’t Do That.” The mentors then meet with their Marines, discussing topics that include leave and liberty travel plans, financial planning, family concerns, unit culture, and personal responsibility, to name a few. The mentor also is required to determine the Marine’s personal risk assessment and then assign the Marine to a risk category with the command’s approval. These risk categories assist in determining how a Marine will execute leave and liberty and the mentor’s oversight during the Marine’s leave and liberty.

The focus group determined the need for greater personal responsibility between a young Marine and a respected NCO from his shop or unit.

Program Evaluation

In October 2004, the MAG-14 safety department evaluated the effectiveness of the program. Since the NCO leadership program’s inception, the number of private motor vehicle mishaps within MAG-14 for the third and fourth quarters of fiscal year 2004 (FY04) was reduced to 11, compared to 20 in the first and second quarters of FY04, and 25 in the third and fourth quarters of FY03. Furthermore, MALS-14, which includes more than 1,000 Marines, reported five alcohol-related incidents in the last half of FY04, compared to 16 in the first half of FY04. They also reported 11 domestic incidents

in the first half of FY04, compared to four in the last half of FY04. In the most recent data concerning reportable incidents from MALS-14, the squadron reported 35 mishaps in the first quarter of FY04. With two weeks remaining in the first quarter of FY05, MALS-14 had only 13 reportable mishaps. As stated by LtCol. John Rutherford, CO, MALS-14, "A 66-percent reduction in Class D mishaps is substantial, and the only change is the concentrated effort throughout the squadron with the NCO leadership program."

While researching the program's effectiveness, there was a decline in the number of reportable mishaps, and there were numerous testimonials from Marines who were influenced positively by the program as well. Mentors have influenced leave/liberty plans, emergency leave situations, domestic violence assistance, and unsat-



We must protect each other off-duty with the same intensity as we would in combat.

isfactory housing conditions. They also have learned to recognize and assist in suicide prevention. The success of this program can be attributed directly to the method that was used in creating the NCO leadership program. MAG-14 officers gave guidance to the programs' creation, but the following eight Marines developed the concept and foundation of the NCO leadership program:

- Sgt. Michael R. Colon, MALS-14
- Sgt. Joseph S. Meisel, Marine Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron 2 (VMAQ-2)
- Cpl. Chad K. Webb, VMAQ-3

- LCpl. Edward Z. Roder, MAG-14
- Sgt. Wesley A. Gilbert, MALS-14
- Sgt. Jose F. Torres, Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 252 (VMGR-252)
- Sgt. Paula A. Turner, Marine Attack Training Squadron 203 (VMAT-203)
- Sgt. Brandon J. Lemke, VMAQ-1

Annual Award

In addition to creating the NCO leadership program, the MAG-14 CO established the Nathan P. Dodd NCO Leadership Award in honor of LCpl. Nathan Dodd. (Prior to his death LCpl. Dodd's squadron had submitted his name for meritorious promotion to corporal.) The annual Dodd award recognizes the NCO who has demonstrated superior leadership, sound mentorship,

and unparalleled inspiration to the young Marines of MAG-14. In October 2004, Sgt. Shauna Ralston of VMGR-253 was the first recipient of this award. During the ceremony, the assistant commandant of the Marine Corps presented Sgt. Ralston with a Certificate of Commendation, a plaque provided by the Marine Corps Association, and a signed copy of *Marine Rifleman* (an autobiography of Col. Wesley L. Fox, USMC (Ret.)) provided by the Marine Corps University Foundation. Also in attendance at the award ceremony were the parents of LCpl. Dodd, who were able to witness his legacy being carried forward and the good that has come from their tragedy.

On Nov. 1, 2004, the commanding general, II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF), instituted an NCO leadership program based on MAG-14's model. The genesis of the MEF basing their program on MAG-14's program was the positive influence the NCO leadership program has had on the safety culture

and mentorship of the MAG-14 Marines. This program is decisively aiding MAG-14 in meeting the secretary of defense's goal of reducing mishaps by 50 percent over two years. ✨

Authors' Note: The authors want to thank Col. Robert A. Fitzgerald, CO, MAG-14, and LtCol. Todd W. Schlund, XO, VMA-223, for providing the guidance and oversight for this program. Maj. East is the director, safety and standardization, MAG-14. 1stLt. Monk is the fiscal officer, MAG-14. Reprinted courtesy of the Marine Corps Gazette. Copyright retained by the Marine Corps Gazette.