

“DRIFTING” *Into* Danger



Expensive rims and colorful paint jobs gleam as a crowd slowly gathers along a deserted stretch of road near a Marine Corps Base in Okinawa. Some cars sit quietly, while the engines of others thrum, waiting in anticipation of being unleashed into the starlit night.

Only a few minutes pass before the loud roar of an engine turning at high revolutions pierces the muted night. This isn't the set of the next film highlighting fast cars and beautiful people; it's another underground event for the illegal street sport of “drifting.”

Although relatively new to North America, this extreme motor sport first was developed in Japan about 12 years ago. The sport combines extreme driving skill with flair and artistry—the drivers negotiate a complicated course at high speeds while in a controlled slide. The competition is judged on execution and style, rather than speed, similar to skateboarding and freestyle motocross.

The idea of drifting is to travel through turns, using the weight of the vehicle (ideally one with a manual transmission; light, rear-wheel drive; and a low, stiff suspension) and traction to slow down. The weight of the car shifts forward while negotiating a turn. Meanwhile, traction is lost at the rear wheels, causing the car to slide. Steering in the direction the car is sliding and administering the right amount of acceleration or popping the clutch come into play while the traction is lost. This action causes the car to drift.

“What ruins the sport and gives it a bad name is when people drift on roads, instead of in controlled environments, and get into accidents.” That comment came from a 19-year-old Okinawa mechanic and drifter himself for more than three years now. One such incident, he went on to

explain, involved a family member from MCAS Iwakuni. No serious injuries occurred, but the event still tainted the 19-year-old's beloved sport.

“The cars go at a very high speed—fast enough to lose control,” said a lance corporal assigned to the provost marshal's office as an accident investigator. “The whole point is to lose traction and slide. The driver never is in complete control.”

Despite their close proximity to these displays of reckless driving, Marines on Okinawa are wise to steer clear of attending or participating. If they don't, they can be found guilty of violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and Marine Corps Bases Japan (MCBJ) orders.

According to a Marine Policeman (MP), charged with investigating illegal and irresponsible driving, “Drifting is a form of showmanship that often involves alcohol and can lead to accidents, injuries



Photo by LCpl. Jonathan Teslevich, USMC

A vehicle in the impound lot at Camp Kinser shows the possible effects of drifting that takes place on Okinawa.



Photo by LCpl. Ruben Calderon, USMC

A Nissan Skyline drifts past a curve in a mock course made of cones in an empty parking lot.

and even death for the participants or bystanders. In their driver-improvement and driver-training courses, as well as in their unit-safety briefs, Americans learn they shouldn't be affiliated with these activities in any way."

The MP said drifting, racing and other high-speed acts occur in several areas across Okinawa. "A spot that is popular lately is south of Camp Kinser, among the warehouses of the port," he explained. "In our most recent operation, we spent 160 man-hours doing surveillance, identification checks, and paperwork."

The MP and other Marines with the provost marshal's office are the enforcement arm, guarding against violations of the UCMJ and MCBJ orders. The legal services support section (LSSS) also gets in on the actions against violators.

According to MCBJ Order 1600.1C, "No person shall become involved as an active or passive participant in any illegal drag racing or speed-competition events in Okinawa Prefecture or U.S. government roadways."

As an LSSS paralegal noted, "No drifting violators of this order have come through our office so far this year." He went on to note that any violator of MCBJ Order 1600.1C would fall under Article 92 of the UCMJ.

The maximum punishment for a violation or failure to obey a lawful general order or regulation

is a dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances, and confinement for two years. "The amount and type of punishment usually depends on the severity of the violation and if any financial damages or injuries are involved," said the paralegal. "Most likely, violators would go before a special or summary court-martial unless someone was killed. It is possible for several charges to pile on top of one another in the case of a severe violation."

It's evident that fear of punishment didn't deter at least one former service member from learning to drift in Okinawa. A little surfing on the Internet turned up the name Ernie Fixmer, a 26-year-old who currently is billed as "one of the top drifters in the United States." The same account allows that he taught himself the sport "during his military days in Okinawa." ■

Material for this story came from several sources, starting with a May 14, 2004, press release written by LCpl. Jonathan Teslevich of MCB Camp Butler. Another source was a Feb. 6, 2004, press release written by LCpl. Ruben Calderon of MCAS Iwakuni. Finally, some info was taken from a story that appeared in the June 3, 2004, issue of The Flagship, a weekly newspaper produced by the public affairs staff of Commander Navy Region Mid-Atlantic.—Ed.