

Keep Your Head Above Water

By Cpl Jennifer Brown

Recreational drowning incidents are the No. 1 killer of status-of-forces-agreement personnel on Okinawa—this statistic makes the island the most dangerous duty assignment in the Marine Corps. That’s the word from Shawn Curtis, an occupational safety and health specialist, who went on to explain the severity of the problem.

“We have more drowning fatalities on Okinawa than the rest of the Marine Corps combined,” he said. The reason this area is such a hot spot for drowning incidents, according to him, is the six-month and one-year duty assignments. “The Marines don’t have the experience on island to let them know how dangerous the water is,” explained Curtis.

Most drowning deaths have involved military members swimming, cliff-diving, snorkeling, and diving in

rough conditions, or standing too close to the surf. As Curtis noted, “They simply got caught in currents and were swept out to sea.

Marine SSgt Jason Hoffman, a training-staff noncommissioned officer at the Camp Foster provost marshal’s office, has spent much of his free time during the last 14 years scuba diving. Hoffman, who recently received his dive-master certification, believes water safety consists of sensibility and staying informed.

“Prior planning, such as watching televised weather reports and checking the current sea conditions, is important,” he said. “Also, staying out of water conditions above your own limits or certification is key to staying safe in the water.