

New Water-Safety Video Helps Marines Stay Safe

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For the first time in four years, the “critical days of summer” 2004 passed without the loss of a single service member to drowning in Okinawa’s surrounding waters. This milestone, according to Marine Corps Base Camp Butler safety officials, is the result of a new water-safety video that was introduced April 16.

With recreational drowning incidents the No. 1 killer of status-of-forces-agreement personnel islandwide, Okinawa is rated 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 since 2000 have involved military members who were swimming, cliff-diving, snorkeling, 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.

“In the first four months of CY2004, we lost five members of our community,” he said. To put these drowning numbers in perspective, consider that while only 10 percent of the Marine Corps’ active-duty force is stationed on Okinawa, 24 percent of all off-duty drowning incidents occur there.

Before participating in water activities, be aware of current water conditions.

The new water-safety video, which aired on the commander’s access channel throughout the summer and which had excerpts aired daily on the American Forces Network radio station, alerts people to the possible dangers associated with swimming. Specifically, it discusses cramps and exhaustion and the effects drugs and alcohol have on personnel participating in water activities. Also included on the video is an explanation of the typhoon and sea conditions, along with a discus-

Photo by Cpl. Jennifer Brown, USMC



A lifeguard blows his whistle and points to a swimmer who is violating an Okinawa pool-safety rule.



Photo by LCpl. Martin R. Harris, USMC

sion of the particularly dangerous water locations around Okinawa.

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

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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. The new video is an excellent way of getting out information; it's up to the individuals whether they heed it."

Curtis agrees with SSgt. Hoffman's advice but takes it further. He has developed four rules for all to follow when swimming at Okinawa beaches and pools:

- Swim in a supervised area where lifeguards are on duty. Only 10 percent of water-related accidents happen when lifeguards are on duty. Swimming under supervision greatly reduces the chance of drowning.
- Never swim alone; use the buddy system. It's easy for a friend to assist or get assistance when he notices a partner having trouble in the water.
- Know your swimming limits and stay within them. Weaker swimmers should not attempt something they know they're not capable of doing.

- Always enter the water feet first, especially when diving in an unfamiliar area or in murky-water conditions. That way, you avoid hitting your head on underwater rocks or coral.

Another thing to remember is never swim during a typhoon or rough sea conditions. "People don't consider just how dangerous the water around here is," said Curtis. "During rough sea conditions, even strong swimmers have trouble in the local rip currents."

Even though the water can be a dangerous place, it doesn't have to be if people just will take precautions during their summer trips to the beach or pool. ■

Some information for this story came from a June 6, 2003, Camp Foster press release by then-Cpl. Ryan D. Libbert. The now-Sgt. Libbert is assigned to the II Marine Expeditionary Force, Camp Lejeune, N.C., as a data network specialist.

Anyone interested in seeing the water-safety video can log onto the website (www.mcbbutler.usmc.mil) and click on "internet." You then click on the "sites" link in the top left portion of the screen, scroll down to "safety," and click on "water-safety video."

If you have a ".mil" address, log onto www.mcbbutler.usmc.mil and click on "intranet." Then click on the "sites" link in the top left portion of the screen, scroll down to "safety," and click on the "water-safety information" link. Then you can click on "water-safety video," as well as a number of other choices.—Ed.