

# Camp Pendleton Wages War on Ecstasy

By Cpl. Nathan J. Ferbert

Prosecutions for use of the drug ecstasy aboard this base could triple last year's 21 cases, said Maj. Steven B. Ockerman, OinC of the E Team, Legal Service Support Section. That's why the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) and local law-enforcement agencies are working together to eradicate the problem and raise awareness about the drug's physical dangers and legal pitfalls.

Since 1994, the NCIS has seen drug use here shift from methamphetamine to ecstasy. More than 60 investigations for suspected distribution of the drug are underway. Conviction for distribution brings a sentence of up to 15 years in confinement, said Daniel D. Simas, resident agent in charge of the local NCIS. As the number of cases has surged, so has the average volume of drugs and money recovered in each case.

Camp Pendleton is not alone in its escalating war against ecstasy. The drug is demanding increased attention from law-enforcement agencies across the country, including the Drug Enforcement Agency, said an anonymous NCIS narcotics agent.

Locally, NCIS cases include sale of the drug. Confiscated quantities range from 20 to 100 pills, sold for about \$20 each. Agents also have uncovered what they call a "loosely held" distri-



Photo by Gerald Nino

The four-leaf clover form is one of many brand logos of ecstasy. These tablets were seized by U.S. Customs officials.

bution organization, with one person in charge and several levels of sellers who return the money to the kingpin.

The NCIS agent said Marines often mistake ecstasy for a "safe" drug. "They're ignorant about its effects," he explained.

According to Cdr. Eric C. McDonald, 1st Marine Division surgeon, "Marines take ecstasy to alter their perception at raves, but that impairs their judgment,



Ecstasy users at raves often wear surgical masks coated with a common, over-the-counter inhalant. The inhalant is believed to heighten the sensations produced by ecstasy.

Photo courtesy of Trinka Porrata, former L.A.P.D. narcotics detective and an expert on raves and club drugs.

which is life-threatening if they think they can drive.” The drug also has been linked to seizures and irregular heartbeats. In short, it can be just as dangerous as heroin.

Another problem is that Marines don’t realize they’re going to get caught if they use ecstasy. “When we catch one person for distribution, we nearly always find out who the other people involved are,” said Cdr. McDonald.

When Marines are convicted of using or selling ecstasy, their records are entered into the FBI’s National Crime Information, which every law-enforcement agency can access. In California, convicts must register as drug offenders. Under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, persons caught distributing drugs—no matter the quantity—will go to jail.

A major obstacle in stopping ecstasy and other drug crimes on Camp Pendleton is that, until someone gets arrested, Marines don’t want to “rat” on fellow Marines. “Instead of helping others stay safe by coming forward with anonymous complaints, they tend to give little information, which makes it very difficult for us to do anything,” said NCIS agent Simas. “If they suspect a guy is under the influence of a drug, they should call a military policeman. It all goes back to what they learn in boot camp: honor, courage, commitment.”

One agent reminded local Marines that they’re culpable if they fail to report a crime. “If you witness another Marine with drugs and don’t bring it to someone’s attention, you can be punished,” he said. 🍀

The man driving this car was taking ecstasy and drinking. It’s a miracle he wasn’t killed; the guardrail missed his head by less than 6 inches.



Photo courtesy of Trinkia Porrata

A common side effect of ecstasy use is involuntary clenching of the jaw. People at all-night dance parties, known as raves, often use pacifiers like these to prevent teeth grinding.

