Old enough to fight, old enough to drink?

by Michael Stetz

SAN DIEGO - Marines who are 18 can be thrown into the very teeth of it. They face death in battle. They make life-and-death decisions in split seconds.

But here's a simple choice they can't make:

"Miller or Bud?"

If Marines are younger than 21, they can't go to a bar and order a cold one.

They are not happy about it, if an informal poll of nearly a dozen underage Marines in Oceanside is any indication.

"If you can take a bullet, you can take a shot," said one Camp Pendleton-based Marine, who, like others, wouldn't give his name for fear of riling supervisors.

Lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18 is an idea being proffered by some who argue that if you can go to war, get married, buy stocks, serve on a jury and vote, you should be able to buy a beer.

The Marine Corps appears to be listening. Last month it softened its ban on drinking by those younger than 21, a policy dating to 1997.

Underage Marines may now drink in ports of call where the drinking age is lower than 21. If commanders approve, beer may also be served in special circumstances, such as returning from a war zone. The drinking would be on base.

Those who support lowering the drinking age generally applaud the new rules.

These young people are being asked to make enormous sacrifices, said John McCardell, the former president of Middlebury College in Vermont who runs Choose Responsibility, an organization that wants the drinking

age lowered. Yet, when underage Marines come home, they face arrest and can jeopardize their fledging military careers if they illegally buy a six-pack.

"That incongruity is not lost on a lot of people," McCardell said.

Organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, however, are concerned about any underage drinking, even if it's supervised. The group says the current age of 21 is the safest.

Some older Marines also have reservations about a drop in the legal drinking age. Although they sympathize with younger comrades, they worry that many lack maturity.

"I've seen a lot of people make bad decisions," said Cpl. David Cedeno, 27, as he was getting a haircut in Oceanside.

As a military police officer, he sees firsthand what alcohol abuse can do. "It's the young ones, statistically, who are at the most risk," Cedeno said.

FOR OLD TIMES

It was during another war, in Vietnam, that a similar cry to lower the drinking age was heard.

Thirty states, excluding California, responded by lowering it from 21 to 18 or 19. But those states raised the drinking age again a decade later because of concerns about drunken driving.

In 1984, President Reagan signed legislation, supported by MADD, penalizing states that didn't increase the drinking age to 21 by withholding a portion of their highway funds.

Although some fought it, all states eventually complied. Each still has the power to rescind it, though a state would again risk losing the federal road money.

In 2005, a legislative effort in Vermont to lower the drinking age to 18 failed. There has been no such effort

in California.

Some contend the current age limit has been a failure. Only a few other nations have a limit that high. In some nations, such as Italy, the drinking age is as low as 16.

In Mexico, the legal age is 18. But young Marines can't cross the border without approval.

U.S. troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, regardless of age, aren't permitted to drink alcohol.

McCardell of Choose Responsibility grew concerned about the age restriction after seeing out-of-control drinking by college students. Many underage people drink regardless of the restriction, he argues, and do so dangerously because there is no supervision.

Binge drinking, for instance, is a relatively new health problem that has resulted from the higher age limit, McCardell said.

He also questions claims by organizations such as MADD that say the current legal age has reduced the number of young people killed by drunken driving.

Cars are safer, law enforcement and penalties are tougher, and the dangers of drunken driving are more widely known, McCardell contends.

MADD counters that lowering the drinking age would only cause more harm. "We tried this experiment in the 1970s, and it was disastrous," said Charles Hurley, chief executive officer of Dallas-based MADD.

Deaths of people ages 18 to 20 in drunken-driving crashes went up more than 30 percent, Hurley said, noting that many states went back to an age-21 limit based only on that.

Hurley also worries about the new Marine policy regarding supervised underage drinking at some events.

"If they think that young Marines are going to wait for their commander to provide them their next drink,

well, I think they'll be surprised," he said.

WELL-EARNED RIGHT?

Young Marines say they can get alcohol. They hit up buddies who are old enough, for instance. It's just more difficult, and risky, because it's illegal.

Some don't blame them for trying.

"If you're old enough to die, you're old enough to drink. I think the drinking age should be 18 for those in the military," said a 22-year-old Marine.

Josh Miles, 25, an infantry instructor, can understand why an 18-year-old Marine would want the right to drink.

He was in Iraq and saw action in Fallujah. Just about everybody came home and knocked back drinks, Miles said. What worries him is that young people may be quicker to abuse it.

Miles said the difficulty of getting alcohol when he was 18 prevented him from making bad choices.

Allowing underage drinking under a controlled environment, such as the new policy permits, could be the best option, Miles said. "It's got to be really regulated."

It's not just young Marines itching to drink legally. The story is the same at San Diego State University.

"You came to the right table," quipped Corbin Binkerd, 19, who sat with two friends, also underage. They all said they should be allowed to legally drink.

Binkerd said he went to Germany for World Cup soccer last year and saw no problems, even though 16-year-olds could legally drink.

Older students, though, had differing opinions about the legal age. Some said 18 can be too young.

Drinking with a friend at the campus bar Louie's Suds N' Sun, Joelle Bonus, 22, observed, "Those three years can make a big difference."

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