

Veterans question Marines' care of war stress

by Steve Liewer

SAN DIEGO - The Marine Corps' macho culture stigmatizes treatment for combat stress and brain injuries while actively punishing behaviors such as drinking, fighting and drug use that result from the lack of treatment, a national veterans' advocacy group asserted Thursday.

Steve Robinson and Georg-Andreas Rogoni, two investigators from Veterans for America, said they spent the past week interviewing Marines, their families, service members' defense attorneys and health professionals at Camp Pendleton Marine Corps base in Oceanside and the San Diego Naval Medical Center.

They visited the base and hospital unescorted. Robinson said he notified the appropriate military officials before he came to each site.

Robinson, Rogoni and other leaders of the group released their findings during a telephone news conference.

"Story after story after story confirms there is a total lack of capacity to deal with the two signature injuries of this war: post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury," said Bobby Muller, the organization's president.

Camp Pendleton officials rebutted the group's assertions in a statement Thursday. They said coping with combat stress has been "a wellness issue central to our theme of overall care for all our Marines, in particular our combat veterans."

The statement said combat stress was a major topic during the Heroes and Healthy Families conference Thursday on the base, and that ongoing services include counseling and medical treatment. Marines are screened for symptoms of combat stress immediately upon returning from war and again 90 to 120 days after that first check, the statement said.

Officials at the San Diego Naval Medical Center, also known as Balboa naval hospital, could not be reached for comment.

Leaders of Veterans for America had cited similar problems at the Army's Fort Carson in Colorado. They said their investigation began in April at the request of several U.S. senators from both political parties, and that they plan to visit more bases in the coming months.

The organization was formed in 1980 as the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. It has lobbied aggressively for the needs of veterans from that era, said Jason Forrester, the group's policy director.

In recent years, it changed its name and began focusing on work with service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Robinson and Rogoni said combat-hardened Marines embrace the "suck it up and drive on" mentality even as they endure second and third deployments in some of Iraq's worst war zones.

Veterans suffering from untreated stress or brain injuries will try to find relief through drugs and alcohol or by simply running away - behaviors common at Camp Pendleton, Robinson said.

"What we're really talking about is a normal response to the rigors of war," said Robinson, a veteran of the Persian Gulf War and a former Army Ranger who retired in 2001. "We want to make sure these Marines who are sent to war have an opportunity to recover."

While the military's medical system is slow to detect and treat combat stress and various brain injuries, Robinson said, Marine units are quick to punish bad behavior. He said some combat vets are drummed out of the Marines before they're diagnosed with certain health problems, making them ineligible for medical treatment.

Robinson said more mental-health specialists are deploying with combat troops and offering short-term treatment after traumatic incidents. But he believes that care is mostly geared toward getting them back in combat instead of aiding in long-term mental health.

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