

Has the Marine Corps Reserve Succumbed to the Drug Culture?

Impacts of legalization

by Mr. Brad Miller

The attitudes about recreational drug use are changing in America. Over the past decade, a wave of legislation has swept through 23 states to legalize what was once considered a felony. Lobbyists' dollars flowed into states selling citizens on the benefits of drug legalization. The main arguments center around medical benefits, eliminating the black market, tax revenue, and criminal justice considerations. In every case, lobbyists sold legislators with "medical use" and eventually moved to legalize recreational use. This rhetorical pattern was created by a lobbying firm prior to the first legalization effort in California and then repeated over and over again in other state legislatures. It has become so effective that 38 states now have legalized medical marijuana, and 23 states have legalized recreational drug use. Over the same period, fewer Marines are being separated for drug abuse. Since fiscal year 2018, a little less than 50 percent of the Marines who went to a separations board were separated from the Marine Corps.¹ This article attempts to answer the question if state drug legalization efforts have affected the views of Marines sitting on separations boards.

Do Marines Still Believe in Zero Tolerance?

The Marine Corps' culture of zero tolerance toward drug use has been a cornerstone of its values and ethos.² However, with the gradual decriminalization and legalization of recreational

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marijuana use in some states, the Marine Corps faces a unique challenge in maintaining this zero-tolerance policy.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps has publicly stated that the Corps loses 8,000 Marines each year

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to non-end of active service attrition.³ From 2009–2019, the Corps lost 11,765 Marines to drug and alcohol offenses.⁴ Gen David Berger noted, "I am deeply troubled by the continued retention of Marines failing to adhere to our standards related to drug use."⁵ As evidence, he cites that since 2018 almost 2,500 Marines have tested positive for illegal drug use yet only 1,175 were separated.⁶ Information coming from several administrative separations' boards shows that the "medical" marijuana rhetoric is being used as an excuse for

confirmed drug use, even though *any use* violates the Marine Corps order.⁷ MCO 1900.16, para 1004(4)(e) requires mandatory administrative separation processing if a Marine tests positive for any illegal drug. The Marine Corps does not recognize a doctor's prescription as a valid excuse for marijuana use. This is the case even when a Marine reservist is not in a drilling status.⁸ The Staff Judge Advocate's Office at 4th MarDiv decided to take a deep analytical dive into every board notification and cases that went to a hearing over the past two years. We found that like most cultural phenomena, attitudes on drug use have ebbed and flowed, like a tide, they change quickly and retract with more time and data. When looking at the issue of drug use within a limited scope of time, things may appear to be a problem, but when looking back through history, it teaches us that the Marine Corps will be as strong as it has always been.

Changing Attitudes Toward Drug Use in Society

Attitudes about the use of illegal drugs changed dramatically before and during the Vietnam War. There are numerous reasons including some

well-known like the prolific drug use around college campuses and the less well-known that many service members were introduced and became addicted to illegal drugs while serving in Vietnam. The Army, for instance, supplied dextro-amphetamines in every soldier's survival kit.⁹ "Dexies" as they were called were meant to assist soldiers to stay alert. Rarely were soldiers told about the potential side effects that included anxiety, repetitive or obsessive behaviors, and amphetamine psychosis. Once members of the military arrived in Vietnam, they were also exposed to marijuana use in almost every village and town in the country.¹⁰ In many places, marijuana was cheaper and more prevalent than tobacco. As the war continued into the 1970s, the attitude of those fighting the war began to change. Many felt disillusioned, one soldier was quoted as saying, "The problem with this war is there's nobody to hate."¹¹ The soldiers ceased fighting and only

proven correct that the numbers were inaccurate—but not in the way the Corps believed. Some units reported that upward of 80 percent of Marines had smoked or regularly smoked marijuana during their time *on duty*.¹⁶ In other words, not only were Marines using illegal drugs, but their use was while patrolling in Vietnam. One of the many reasons for the underreporting was that hospital staff was trained to document *symptoms* of injuries like hepatitis, pneumonia, and personality disorders; not the cause of such conditions which could often be traced to marijuana and opium use. Even when reporting deaths, there was no mechanism for tracking deaths related to drug abuse, instead, they were categorized as "unknown."¹⁷

When those soldiers, sailors, and Marines finally came home from Vietnam they encountered a counterculture on college campuses and in the public that embraced drug use. Peter

laws and policies and the minds of the people from that time until today. The biggest problem though is that there is little evidence that marijuana has any medical properties. It is almost an unquestioned assumption that can never be challenged. A review of the literature shows that marijuana has little medical benefit with significant side effects.

Marijuana Has Little Medical Benefit

Like many difficult issues, deeper analysis is required to understand the nuances. Statements like "marijuana is medicinal" or "marijuana assists patients with PTSD" require a level of analysis that cannot fit on a billboard or campaign notice. To determine if these statements are true, we must look at the standards of proof, the evidence in support, and the results of the long-term studies. Marijuana is made up of two main components: THC and CBD. THC is the psychoactive ingredient that gets people high, however, THC from the 1960s is not the same THC that is sold today. Over the past 70 years, the average amount of THC in a cigarette has gone from less than one percent to over 20 percent today.¹⁸ This is mainly attributable to genetic modification and lab-created marijuana. In the 1960s, the marijuana sold and smoked grew outside; today, it is harvested in large indoor labs overseen by PhDs. These labs can extract almost pure THC from a plant and include it in many products including cookies, brownies, gummies, and various other products. While the products appear to be innocent, the amount of THC can be upwards of 40 to 50 percent, making these products essentially poison.¹⁹ The poison has been shown to cause a host of problems including links to violence and psychosis.

A 2013 paper in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* used data from a federal survey of more than 12,400 American high school students to examine the link between alcohol, marijuana, and aggression.²⁰ The researchers' initial hypothesis was that alcohol increased violence while marijuana reduced it. Instead, they found that students who had recently used marijuana were more than three times as likely to be physically aggressive as those

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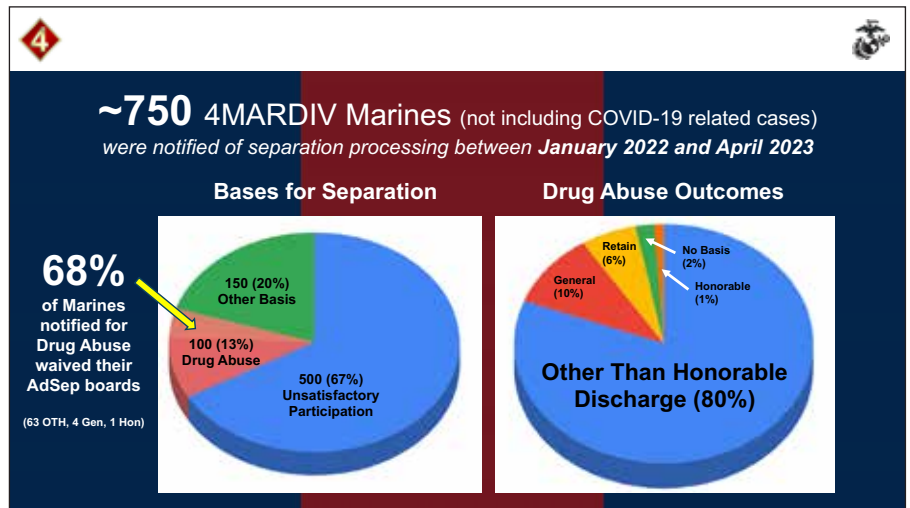
sought to stay alive and even James MacGregor of the *Wall Street Journal* in the 18 November 1969 issue cited that the desertion rate was double what it had been during the Korean War and that "the 23,000 men missing at that time were enough to constitute a full combat division."¹²

The disillusionment led to the drug problem getting so bad that in 1971 30 percent of all Marines had used marijuana and narcotics (opium) during their tours of Vietnam.¹³ These numbers were up from a little more than one percent just two years prior.¹⁴ Of course, the Marine Corps initially responded by stating that the numbers were inaccurate, and the drug use was far less than was being reported by the media.¹⁵ But as more reports came out of Vietnam, the Marine Corps was

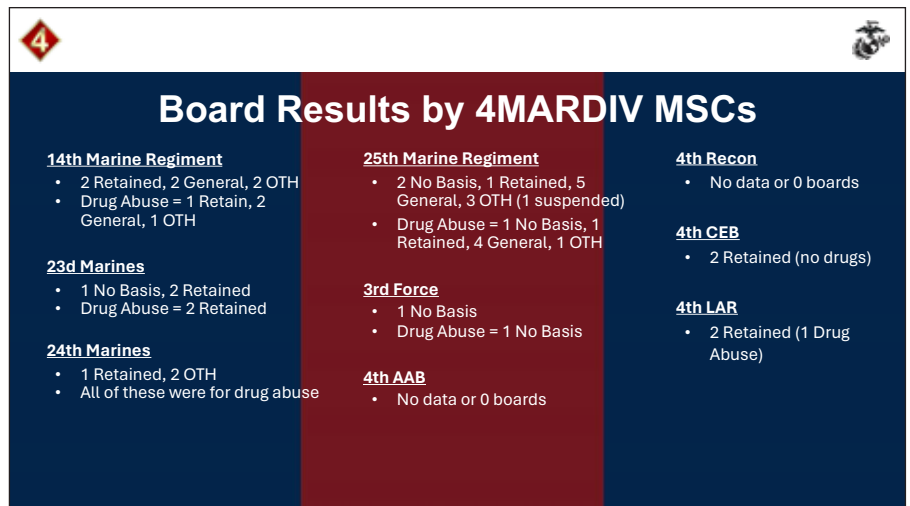
Tosh sang a song to "Legalize it, And don't criticize it, It's good for the flu, good for asthma, good for tuberculosis, even umara compositis." Songs like this were prevalent, and while none of these claims made in the song were true and *umara compositis* is a made-up condition, it did not prevent statements like these from becoming mainstream arguments for legalization. The legalization movement that began in the mid-70s led to New Mexico in 1978 being the first state to allow the medical use of marijuana in limited circumstances, and San Francisco in 1991 being the first city to allow medical marijuana dispensaries. Then in 1996, California became the first state to approve medical marijuana. The marketing related to marijuana being a medical product was used across the Nation to shape the

who abstained from both. A 2016 paper in *Psychological Medicine* examined marijuana use and criminal behavior among 400 boys in London who were followed for 40 years. The paper found that marijuana use was associated with a ninefold increase in violent behavior even after adjusting for other variables. There are numerous papers and studies that have confirmed these statistics from countries around the world. The studies do not just show a link between marijuana use and violence, there is also a link between marijuana use and psychosis. A 2010 paper entitled, “Association Between Cannabis Use and Psychosis-Related Outcomes Using Sibling Pair Analysis in a Cohort of Young Adults,” *Archives of General Psychiatry*, showed using cannabis at age 15 raised the risk of hallucinations by almost 3 times at age 21.²¹ Another 2011 paper in *Addiction* followed 591 participants in Switzerland and found that using cannabis regularly in adolescence raised the risk of paranoid ideas by 2.6 times. *JAMA Psychiatry* in 2018 found that teenage cannabis use roughly tripled the risk of psychotic symptoms

It is not just the studies that show conclusively that marijuana use has no medicinal benefits to U.S. service members. The anecdotal evidence from America’s longest wars confirms the evidence from the studies. The war in Vietnam lasted for about twenty years from 1955–1975. As the war inched closer to its second decade, it almost grounded to a halt. Those fighting on the ground lost hope and purpose, so they sought out ways to deal with the pointlessness of the war. In 1967, reports of drug abuse began to be reported by the American media. John Steinbeck IV, son of *Grapes of Wrath* author, served as a war correspondent with Armed Forces Radio and wrote an article for *The Washingtonian* in 1968 entitled, “The Importance of Being Stoned in Vietnam.”²² In the article, Mr. Steinbeck discusses the prevalence of marijuana use where he estimated about 75 percent use the drug, “The question comes up, ‘How many Americans in Vietnam smoke this ancient weed, and why, and when?’ The answer, in order, is that most (seventy-five percent) young soldiers smoke it,



Eighty percent of all Marines notified of separation for drug abuse received an other than honorable discharge. (Figure provided by author.)



Here are the actual administrative separation board results for the 4th MarDiv MSCs from January 2022 through April 2023. (Figure provided by author.)

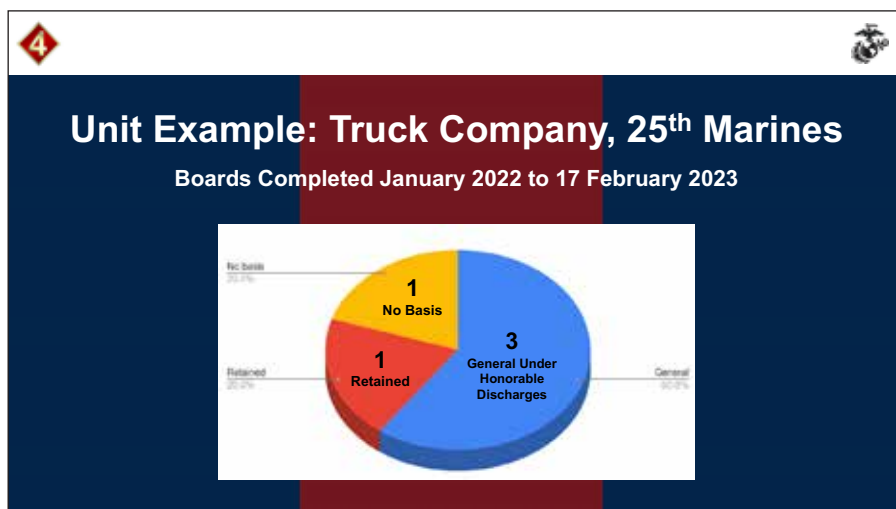
for all sorts of reasons, all the time.”²³ If the drug has a benefit, there would be some evidence of that benefit in the Marines and soldiers returning from the Vietnam War. They did not return home in a better mental state than when they left. Certainly, the use of drugs was not the only factor in the deteriorating mental conditions of the returning service members but there are no reports that units who smoked marijuana in the field experienced less post-traumatic stress.

Even with these statistics and hundreds of studies over the past 100 years, people still tend to hold onto their beliefs about drugs and marijuana use.

The big question is—are *personal* opinions changing the results of separation boards? Based upon the data the answer is: no.

Drug Use Attitudes Are Not Affecting Separations Boards

Information coming from 4th MarDiv shows that attitudes about marijuana and drug use are not affecting separations for drug abuse.²⁴ Here is the data: between January 2022 and April 2023, there were 750 Marines notified for processing (non-Covid-19 related).²⁵ One hundred Marines were notified of a separation based upon drug abuse and 68 of those waived their board.²⁶



Initially, Truck Company appeared to be an outlier with two of five boards resulting in a no basis finding or retention. (Figure provided by author.)

Of the 100 drug abuse notifications, 63 resulted in an other-than-honorable discharge, there were four general discharges, one honorable discharge, and two boards found no basis.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps’ culture of zero tolerance has been a crucial aspect of its commitment to discipline, readiness, and combat effectiveness. However, the changing legal landscape surrounding recreational marijuana use presents the Marine Corps with complex challenges. Balancing evolving societal attitudes toward marijuana with the need to uphold military readiness and discipline requires thoughtful consideration and adaptable policies. Through education, leadership, and robust drug screening procedures, the Marine Corps has and continues to navigate these challenges while maintaining its core values and mission success. Nonetheless, striking this balance will necessitate ongoing analysis, collaboration, and evaluation to ensure the Marine Corps remains a formidable and disciplined force, true to its zero-tolerance ethos. Most importantly, the data unequivocally shows that the Marine Corps has *not* succumbed to the drug culture. Attitudes around recreational use of drugs are certainly changing as states continue to legalize use. But as with most things, every action has an equal reaction, and the reaction will lead to an increased

number of eligible Marines choosing against recreational drug use. These are the Marines who will lead the Marine Corps into continued success.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 5300.17A Marine Corps Substance Abuse Program*, (Washington, DC: 2012).
3. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
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7. 4th Marine Division CLA.
8. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO1900.16, § 1004(4)(d) Marine Corps Separation and Retirement Manual*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
9. Likasz Kamienski, “The Drugs That Built a Super Soldier,” *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/04/the-drugs-that-built-a-super-soldier/477183>.
10. John Steinbeck IV, “The Importance of Being Stoned in Vietnam,” *The Washingtonian*, January 1, 1968, <https://www.washingtonian.com/1968/01/01/the-importance-of-being-stoned-in-vietnam>.

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11. William Hammond, *Public Affairs, The Military and Media, 1962–1968, The United States Army in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

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17. Ibid.

18. Mahmoud A. ElSohly, PhD, et al., “Changes in Cannabis Potency over the Last Two Decades (1995–2014): Analysis of Current Data in the United States,” *Biol Psychiatry* 79, No. 7 (2016).

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20. Laura Dellazizzo, M.Sc., et al., “Association Between the Use of Cannabis and Physical Violence in Youths: A Meta-Analytical Investigation Journal of Interpersonal Violence,” *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 177, No. 7 (2020).

21. John McGrath MD, PhD, et al., “Association Between Cannabis Use and Psychosis-Related Outcomes Using Sibling Pair Analysis in a Cohort of Young Adults,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 67, No. 5 (2010).

22. “The Importance of Being Stoned in Vietnam.”

23. Ibid.

24. LtCol Craig Clark, Maj Joseph Neely, Maj George Stamps, Sgt Melvin Segue, and Cpl Leonardo Hernandez, *Administrative Separations Data Analysis for 4th Marine Division Marines, January 2022–April 2023*, (New Orleans: Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, 4th Marine Division, 2023).

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

