

Safe Havens

Religious Organizations Encourage, Promote Marines' Spiritual Fitness



A group of active-duty and veteran Marines and Sailors who attend The Anchor gather on the beach in Oceanside, Calif., in December 2015. The Christian organization, which operates a facility in downtown Oceanside, provides servicemembers with a community of spiritual support and a place to unwind.

By Sara W. Bock

"Research indicates that spiritual fitness plays a key role in resiliency; in our ability to grow, develop, recover, heal and adapt. Regardless of individual philosophy or beliefs, spiritual well-being makes us better warriors and people of character capable of making good choices on and off duty ... By attending to spiritual fitness with the same rigor given to physical, social and mental fitness, Marines and Sailors can become and remain the honorable warriors and model citizens our Nation expects."

—General Robert B. Neller,
37th Commandant of the Marine Corps,
in ALMAR 033/16

It's widely known that the Marine Corps places a strong emphasis on being a physically fit force in readiness, but recent efforts by Headquarters Marine Corps reflect an increased attention to the development of "spiritual fitness" among its ranks. Spiritual fitness is a term that's considerably more ambiguous than its "physical fitness" counterpart, but the underlying intention is that developing

resiliency and strong moral character contributes to the well-being of both individual Marines and the Corps in which they serve.

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ing with wounds of war—both visible and unseen—and some are struggling with difficulties in their personal lives or relationships that may have been exacerbated by completing numerous deployments in short periods of time. In an effort to overcome these and other challenges, many Marines turn to their personal faith as a source of strength and support. For those

Marines, their religious beliefs are integral to their ability to develop and maintain spiritual fitness.

As an exceptionally diverse organization in which many religions, backgrounds and personal beliefs are represented, the Corps' definition of spiritual fitness is not aligned with a particular religion, faith or set of beliefs; rather, as Gen Neller's October 2016 ALMAR stated, it's centered on building good character and the propensity to make good choices both on and off duty. This can be achieved through many different avenues, both religious and non-religious.

Without downplaying the importance of physical fitness, the leaders of today's Corps have made it clear that a truly "fit" Marine is also well-developed in the spiritual, mental and social realms. This renewed focus on the "whole" Marine is indicative of an understanding that spirituality, in any form, helps build the resilience that is key to a strong Marine Corps.

And while unit commanders and chaplains are tasked with leading the charge on the spiritual fitness front, many external organizations provide outreach programs that exist solely to help interested Marines



Sgt Levi Moran, USMC (Ret), left rear, the director of The Anchor, stands with a group of his organization's volunteers at Mission Hills Church in San Marcos, Calif., in 2015. The team visited the church, which provides support to The Anchor, to update its members on their outreach program.

and Sailors develop a stronger sense of faith, character and morality.

For those Marines who are interested in or have chosen to follow the teachings of Christianity, there are two outreach groups in particular—The Anchor, located in Oceanside, Calif., and Tun Tavern Fellowship, a Corps-wide organization based in Quantico, Va.—that are dedicated to providing spiritual “safe havens” where Marines can be part of a faith community that provides food, activities, social events and Bible studies to aid in their spiritual fitness. These are just two of the many spiritual outreaches to Marines, and while they have no connection with each other, they share a similar mission of providing support specifically tailored to Marines in close proximity to their bases and stations. With retired Marines leading the charge in both organizations, they focus on not only spiritual mentorship, but also on providing attendees with a place that feels like home.

The Anchor Oceanside, Calif.

In downtown Oceanside, Calif., just outside the gates of Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton amid a surplus of bars and clubs, sits The Anchor, a café and gathering place that is geared specifically for active-duty, reserve, retired and veteran

Marines and Sailors. It's full of pool and foosball tables, dart boards, TV screens and Xbox systems, and what attendees say are the best sandwiches and milkshakes in town—served free of charge. On Friday nights, the staff serves a catered dinner, and they host Super Bowl parties and other events throughout the year.

On the surface, it seems like a great hangout spot for servicemembers, particularly young ones, and it is. But beyond the tangible benefits, The Anchor provides attendees with a community of Christian mentors who are eager to encourage those who are interested in becoming more spiritually fit.



The Anchor's downtown Oceanside, Calif., location provides Marines and Sailors with a safe, supportive atmosphere to hang out, play games and connect on a personal and spiritual level.



COURTESY OF THE ANCHOR

From the left, founders Charles Ranson Jr., James Lowerison, Gaus Wimans and Hervey Sumner are pictured on the opening day of the Servicemen's Center, a project of the Christian Businessmen's Committee of Northern San Diego County, Feb. 24, 1951. Known today as The Anchor, the organization was founded as a spiritual outreach to Marines and Sailors headed to fight in the Korean War.

"We're not pushing anything on anybody, and I like to be clear on that," said Sergeant Levi Moran, USMC (Ret), an ordained pastor who is currently serving as the director of The Anchor. "It's just to give them a place to let them know that they're safe and they can be themselves and be rough around the edges," he added.

Moran, a former field radio operator, was medically retired from the Corps in 2013 after being seriously wounded in

Afghanistan in 2006 when his humvee was hit by an improvised explosive device (IED). He's refreshingly open about the things he struggled with after returning from war, from undergoing several surgeries to experiencing feelings of post-traumatic stress, which he says doesn't ever really go away.

"It sticks around," Moran said of post-traumatic stress.

For Moran, the redemption and healing

he personally found in the Christian faith helped him overcome the challenges of what he calls being "messed up in combat"—both physically and spiritually. Today, he is grateful for the opportunity to reach out and share his beliefs with Marines who are struggling with the same things he did after returning from war, as well as with those young enlisted Marines who have not yet experienced combat but likely will in the years to come.

Founded in 1951 to reach out to Marines and Sailors headed to Korea and later to those bound for Vietnam, The Anchor, known in those days as the Servicemen's Center of Oceanside, recently opened its doors beyond the ranks of active-duty Marines and Sailors to include reserve, veteran and retired.

"They can say, 'Hey, I've got a community that's behind me. I'm not alone, and I can make it,'" said Moran of The Anchor's multigenerational attendees. He takes pride in having grown the organization into a place where all Marines feel like they are taken care of, regardless of when or where they served. Most attendees fall between the ages of 18 and 47.

Although The Anchor was providing good food and strong spiritual support for Marines long before the recent Corps-wide push for "spiritual fitness," Moran is encouraged by the Commandant's renewed emphasis on mind, body and spirit.

Active-duty and veteran Marines and Sailors and their families gather at a Thanksgiving dinner at The Anchor in Oceanside, Calif., in November 2015. The organization regularly provides free meals and snacks in addition to programs and resources to help interested Marines become more spiritually fit. (Photo courtesy of The Anchor)





Active-duty Marines from MCB Camp Pendleton, Calif., enjoy snacks and conversation at The Anchor, which is intended to be a place where servicemembers can feel comfortable regardless of their views or beliefs. They are invited to attend Bible studies and participate in religious discussions, but these are not mandatory.

"We also provide a Bible study that they can attend if they like. It's not mandatory, and we teach them what it says and how it applies to their military life ... and in their marriage, or any way it will help them," said Moran, who added that he brings in a variety of guest speakers on Friday evenings and provides interested Marines with resources like books, CDs, and DVDs that help them become better professionally, in their Christian faith and in their relationships with others.

Whether Marines visit The Anchor once for a 20-minute meal or decide to attend regularly for the duration of their enlistments, Moran sees an opportunity to positively impact the life of each individual who walks through the doors. He doesn't beat around the bush about the fact that he's a pastor and considers himself to be pretty straightforward, but above all, he wants the Marines and Sailors who come to The Anchor to know that he's there for them, if they want to talk about anything—regardless of what motivated them to come inside. And if they just want to eat and hang out, he said, they are more than welcome.

The Anchor also provides a link to local crisis intervention programs, such as the "Courage to Call" helpline and the Hawthorne Veteran and Family Resource Center, run by Interfaith Community Services in San Diego County. Moran also is working on ways to connect Marines and Sailors who have attended The Anchor and are transitioning from active duty with people in their home state who want to support, encourage and provide a community for them. He sees this as a way to potentially decrease the number

of suicides that occur after Marines leave their Corps community.

Every Friday night, retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant Jim Jason attends the Bible study at The Anchor. Not only does he personally benefit from his attendance, but he also acts as a mentor for the young Marines who attend. Jason, a reconnaissance Marine who retired from the Corps in 2003, has a master's degree in theology and serves as a lay leader, assisting chaplains at Camp Pendleton with Sunday services for Marine recruits during the portion of their training that takes place on Edson Range. The Anchor is a ministry that he's proud to be involved in. He sees it as a "light in a sea of darkness."

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—GySgt Jim Jason, USMC (Ret)**

street ... there's no pressure there. There's no sales pitch. No one's going to ram [Christianity] down your throat. That's not how to get the message across," said Jason, who encourages Marines to come to The Anchor for free chow at the very least. "It's very laid back. It's a safe haven for them," he added.

In acting as spiritual mentors to the younger attendees at The Anchor, retired Marines like Moran and Jason have the opportunity to share some of the mistakes they made as young Marines. Moran hopes that this type of interaction, which he calls a "big brother" or "dad" mindset, might prevent them from making poor life choices.

"No one came alongside me and said, 'Hey, Moran, put this amount in your savings so you have a backup. Don't go buy a car over there. Don't go get a loan like that,' " Moran said of the early years of his enlistment. "[The Anchor] allows them to meet people who go, 'These are the mistakes I made with finances, don't make these mistakes. These are the mistakes I made in my marriage after combat. Don't make these mistakes. These are the mistakes I made in not seeking help because we're supposed to be hardcore, and I wish I did.' "



Marines enjoy a Friday night meal in White Sulphur Springs, Pa., during TTF's Quantico/National Capital Region Conference, which took place Jan. 13-15. Annual conferences are one of the many ways TTF provides spiritual support for Christian Marines.



COURTESY OF TTF

LtCol Mike West, USMC (Ret), center, the TTF director and network missionary to the National Capital Region, stands with Marines at the TTF Conference in White Sulphur Springs, Pa., in January.

For more information about The Anchor and the services it provides for active-duty, reserve, veteran and retired Marines and Sailors, visit www.theanchoroceanside.com.

Tun Tavern Fellowship Quantico, Va. (and Corps-wide)

Named for Philadelphia's Tun Tavern, the legendary 1775 recruiting "headquarters" for the newly established Continental Marines, Tun Tavern Fellowship (TTF) was founded in 2006 by a group of Marines in the Quantico, Va., area who wanted to create an all-ranks Christian network of active-duty and retired Marines who were

looking to strengthen their faith and be part of a community of servicemembers who share similar beliefs.

With the ideology that "the stronger we are in faith, the more excellent we will be in battle," the TTF is an auxiliary ministry of Crossroads Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) located in Dumfries, Va. And while the organization maintains its strong roots in the area around Marine Corps Base Quantico and the National Capital Region, it has grown exponentially over the last decade and now has a presence at bases and stations across the globe.

TTF does not have one primary physical location; rather, its leaders—both full-

time staff and volunteer—hold meetings and gatherings at base dining facilities, local restaurants, homes, churches, chapels and even in its own Tun Tavern Inns, which are dedicated homes used for temporary and permanent lodging, meals, Bible studies and recreation events. The homes are purchased through the financial investments of Christian Marines and provide a space for spiritual growth and community.

Currently, the organization has Tun Tavern Inns near MCB Quantico, MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C., and Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla., with plans to eventually add homes on the West Coast, Japan and Hawaii.

The relationship-based outreach program operates through a variety of different approaches, to include one-on-one mentoring and small group meetings, usually conducted over a meal; monthly dinners and discussions; Bible studies; breakfasts; retreats; conferences and special events featuring notable speakers. For Marines stationed at Quantico, more than a dozen Bible studies take place each week on base at a variety of different locations—in base housing neighborhoods, headquarters buildings, restaurants and the base chapel.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Mike West, USMC (Ret), the TTF director and network missionary to the National Capital Region, the goal is to have a similar "density" of opportunities for interested Marines at all bases and stations, not just at Quantico. Some regions have full time TTF "network missionaries," who are



COURTESY OF TTF

SgtMaj Mark Byrd, USMC (Ret), far right, speaks with a Marine attending Embassy Security Group Training at MCB Quantico, Va., during a weekly spiritual leadership dinner sponsored by TTF. Events like these are made possible through strong relationships with unit commanders and chaplains.

retired Marines and their spouses, while in other areas, such as Southern California and Okinawa, Japan, TTF's ministries are run by volunteers—some of whom are active-duty Marines.

These retired Marine "missionary" families understand the challenges that Marines and their families face and know how to help, said West.

West is the second director of TTF but has been involved in the organization since its inception. He strongly believes that encouraging Marines' spiritual fitness has a direct impact on their ability to logically prepare for and process the stresses they face.

"We see the mission of TTF directly supporting folks that are struggling with off-tempo, stresses of the Corps—through decades of personal resiliency—when they can make sense of death, dying, separation, injury. So all of those stressors are mitigated by a strong personal faith and a membership in a network of believers who can keep them focused on moving through it with a deep dependency on God and a perspective of the future that is full of hope," said West.

The leaders of TTF understand not only the stressors that come from combat, but also the impact that frequent relocation and permanent change of station (PCS) moves can have on Marines and Marine families. An integral part of their ministry is sustaining and expanding a network of "like-minded" individuals worldwide so that their faith is not negatively impacted by a change in location and loss of community—particularly when moving overseas.

There are a number of specific groups that TTF provides specific programs including lieutenants attending The Basic School (TBS) at Quantico; flight school students at NAS Pensacola; and Marines attending Embassy Security Group training at Quantico.

Every Sunday night, Sergeant Major Mark Byrd, USMC (Ret), volunteers as a leader for TTF's ministry to the Embassy Security Group training. Through a strong relationship with the chaplains at Quantico and the work of local volunteers who prepare food, TTF is able to provide what they call a "spiritual leadership dinner" for interested Marines who are attending training.

West considers Byrd as a primary example of how TTF strives to leverage a retired Marine's 30 years of experience and passion to continue to invest in Marines to build a legitimate relationship with the unit's commander, staff noncommissioned officers and chaplains.

For lieutenants at TBS, a Saturday morning breakfast and Bible study is held



Lieutenants undergoing training at The Basic School gather for a Saturday morning breakfast and Bible study at the Quantico Tun Tavern Inn, one of the homes owned and operated by TTF for ministry purposes.

at the Quantico Tun Tavern Inn. Different retired Marines are brought in to facilitate the discussion each week with the intention of giving the lieutenants exposure to different military occupational specialty (MOS) backgrounds, career paths and experiences.

"Often they get to see and be encouraged by the integration of faith and profession as reflected in the different lives of retired

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—CWO-4 David Pedraza, USMC

officers and staff NCOs," said West of the lieutenants.

Governed by a Board of Directors and under the guidance of a Board of Advisors, TTF strives to help Christian Marines become more spiritually fit and stay spiritually fit during challenging times.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 David Pedraza, a Marine Counterintelligence/Human Intelligence officer stationed at MCB Quantico, is a member of TTF's Board of Directors. He got involved in TTF in 2013 after he saw the impact of caring for his Marines who were dealing with a variety of life difficulties.

"I discovered that when an older Marine, with life experience, cares enough to come alongside a younger Marine, in the midst of life's woes, to encourage one to live right and be faithful, that there is tremendous practical benefit," said Pedraza.

The experience brought Pedraza to try to find a group that would give him the opportunity to mentor junior Marines on a spiritual, not just professional, level, and he found that in TTF.

"I believe that a para-ministry like TTF, which encourages the development of the spiritual disciplines associated with a strong moral compass, such as Christian fellowship, mentoring and discipleship is, in fact, critical to the ethical and moral development of our future Marines," said Pedraza.

Having experienced tumultuous times in his personal life and marriage during the early years of his enlistment in the Corps, Pedraza knows firsthand the struggles that many Marines experience. His goal, through participation in TTF, is to help interested Marines become more spiritually developed.

"Spiritually developed people are at peace in their marriages, and enjoy healthy, personal and professional relationships, translating into high morale at work and personal fulfillment at home," said Pedraza. "Such a person will more than likely then possess a proper sense of organizational value, but more importantly, will possess self-worth and high self esteem."

To learn more about Tun Tavern Fellowship and its growing presence worldwide, visit www.tuntavernfellowship.org.

