

NOT FOR PUBLICATION
UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS

ON LEARNING FROM AND PREVENTING FUTURE TRAINING MISHAPS

23 MARCH 2021

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Chairman Garamendi, Ranking Member Lamborn, and distinguished members of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the issue of learning from and preventing future training mishaps. As the Commandant stated in his planning guidance, the Marine Corps is a Naval expeditionary force-in-readiness, and that readiness is a strategic warfighting advantage for the Nation. In order to maintain that strategic advantage, we must be able to train to and operate in austere environments at sea, in the air, and ashore without unnecessary sacrifices of personnel and equipment.

Over the past several years, the Marine Corps has diligently worked to reduce training mishaps. We have taken an institutional approach to improving safety performance, including a new standards-focused Safety Management System, better reporting and information sharing tools, and service-wide changes based on investigation findings. While we have made significant progress, there is still much work to do. Ensuring institutional change occurs and lasts is my personal priority.

Leadership remains the bedrock of Marine Corps initiatives to improve safety culture, reduce mishaps, and increase readiness. Based on reviews of investigations and mishap reports, we find that a large number of mishaps involved Marines choosing to take unnecessary risks or deviating from established operating procedures. In many cases, Marines were exhibiting one of the strongest aspects of Marine Corps culture—a “can-do” attitude. This attitude helps us win our Nation’s battles, but it can also lead to preventable mishaps. By leaders emphasizing that there is a right way to do things, what the right way is, and the importance of choosing to do things the right way every time, we are reinforcing the positive aspects of our culture with a commitment to consistently meeting high standards. Active leadership, using lessons learned and the resources detailed in this statement, is the key to reducing mishaps. We appreciate your

support and oversight as we improve our safety performance and advance the lethality of the Nation's Naval expeditionary force-in-readiness.

This statement will update the subcommittee on our aviation and ground training mishap trends, as well as Marine Corps initiatives to improve our safety performance. Additionally, this statement discusses our responses to two significant mishaps: the December 2018 mid-air collision of an F/A-18D Hornet and a KC-130J Super Hercules, and the July 2020 sinking of an Assault Amphibious Vehicle (AAV). The Marine Corps recognizes the selfless service and sacrifice of the Marines and Sailor that died in these two mishaps. We are committed to honoring their memories by learning lessons from these mishaps and ensuring meaningful and lasting change.

AVIATION TRAINING MISHAPS

Mishaps Trends and Improvements

The Marine Corps recognizes that our aviation mishap rates over the past ten years are a cause for concern. As reflected in the National Commission on Military Aviation Safety (NCMAS) Report to the President and Congress, our Class A aviation mishap rate was the highest of all services from FY11-FY18. We concur with the NCMAS report statement that readiness is inextricably tied to safe operations and we appreciate the opportunity to use their assessment to continue improving Marine Aviation.

While there is still work to do to improve our safety practices and prevent mishaps, the Marine Corps' Class A aviation mishap rate has significantly declined since the end of the NCMAS report period in 2018. FY19-FY20 was our best two-year period for Class A aviation mishaps on record. In FY20, the Marine Corps had a Class A flight mishap rate of 0.93 mishaps per 100,000 flight hours, compared to a rate of 4.32 mishaps in FY17. Our Class B rate has held steady at 2.32, and our Class C rate of 8.82 is below our five-year average rate of 9.46. The loss

of life caused by the December 2018 mid-air collision between an F/A-18D Hornet and a KC-130J Super Hercules, discussed later in this statement, required us to look closely at our safety culture and practices. As a result, significant changes are underway. We are committed to sustaining these positive trends and more effectively managing the many inherent risks our Marines face every day.

Several recent Marine Corps initiatives are in line with NCMAS recommendations regarding materiel readiness, flight hours, retention incentives, and operational tempo. With the help of Congress, we increased funding to aviation readiness enabler accounts each year starting in FY17 to facilitate material readiness recovery efforts and flight hour generation. Our investments are displaying returns, with FY20 fleet squadron aircraft mission capable rates up 9.8 percentage points from FY17 values. This equates to 50 more flyable aircraft on any given day. Of particular note, our materiel readiness increased despite COVID-19. This is directly attributable to increased Congressional funding targeted at key readiness enabler accounts in previous FYs. Further, we have increased our hours per pilot per month from only 13.5 in FY16 to 17.2 in FY19. COVID-19 impacts in FY20, including advanced and joint-level exercise cancellations, resulted in 15 percent fewer executed flight hours than the previous year. Through increased simulator use and prioritization of unit-level core and mission skill proficiency qualifications, we prevented a decrease in aggregate training levels. However, exercise cancellations cost us the ability to train for our most critical flight leadership and capability qualifications, as well as the integrated and joint exercises that are essential for building a lethal combined arms force. Our return to large-scale exercises in FY21, increasing aircraft mission capable rates, and continually refined COVID-19 mitigation practices will help generate the increased flight hours and training that will ensure our readiness to face future threats. We also

continue to offer bonus pay to both maintainers and pilots to incentivize retention of our best Marines, and have adjusted operational tempo in accordance with National Defense Strategy priorities to improve unit readiness.

Another NCMAS area in which the Marine Corps has made significant improvements is in hazard and mishap reporting ability and information sharing. In April 2018, we fielded the Aviation Safety Awareness Program (ASAP) to all aviation units. ASAP allows individuals to anonymously report hazards directly to their safety officer and commanding officer, who can then take action and provide feedback on the reported hazard. Additionally, ASAP also affords individuals the ability to submit comments on the command climate of the unit, providing valuable and timely information to the commander on problem areas. Since its fielding, we have received over 6,600 ASAP reports that contained actionable information for safety improvements. In October 2020, we completed a seven-year effort to create the Marine Corps Safety Management System (SMS), which consolidated 18 policy documents into a single systems-based approach to safety. The SMS, modeled on the Federal Aviation Administration's safety management system, focuses on operational excellence through risk management. We have also recently implemented the Department of the Navy's Streamlined Incident Reporting (SIR) system for air and ground mishap reporting. SIR replaces the outdated Web-Enabled Safety System and has improved mishap information sharing through easier inputs and better search functions. The combination of SMS, ASAP, and SIR provides the structure for Marine leaders to encourage a healthy reporting culture and emphasize the importance of learning from our mistakes and near-misses.

Consolidated Disposition Authority and Institutional Actions

On December 6, 2018, the Marine Corps suffered a tragic loss when six Marines died in a midair collision between an F/A-18D and a KC-130J off the coast of Japan. The complexity of this mishap required a comprehensive review of the factors leading to the mishap. I appointed the Marine Corps' longest serving aviator as the Consolidated Disposition Authority (CDA) to conduct this review, which led to a clearer understanding of the mishap's causal factors and the institutional and organizational context surrounding it. Upon conclusion of the review, I directed 11 actions to address the CDA's 42 recommendations. These actions include improving assignment policies, and information sharing; clarifying search and rescue coordination procedures; updating publications; procuring more capable location devices; and providing clearer direction on sleep, medications, investigating officer assignments, and mishap cost assessments. We submit monthly updates on our progress to this subcommittee and we appreciate your continued feedback.

Our deepest sympathies and condolences remain with the families and friends of Corporal Daniel Baker, Major James Brophy, Staff Sergeant Maximo Flores, Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Herrmann, Captain Jahmar Resilard, and Corporal William Ross. We will continue to honor their memories, as well as those lost in other aviation mishaps, as we work to prevent future mishaps.

GROUND TRAINING MISHAPS

Mishaps Trends and Improvements

Similar to our aviation mishap rates, the Marine Corps recognizes that our historical ground training mishap rates are too high. In FY20, our 13 Class A ground on-duty mishaps slightly exceeded our five-year average of 12.8 mishaps. Our 15 FY20 Class B mishaps in this category were also slightly higher than our five-year average of 13.2 mishaps. Of note, our 227

FY20 Class C ground on-duty mishaps were significantly lower than our five-year average of 361 mishaps. Actively engaged leadership at all levels, supported by the programs discussed in this statement and a commitment to standards, are critical to reducing the unnecessary loss of life and equipment caused by these mishaps.

Tactical vehicle safety is a specific area of focus for our safety efforts. While the Marine Corps had 3 fatal tactical vehicle mishaps in FY19 and in FY20, we have had zero fatal tactical vehicle mishaps to-date in FY21. We attribute this improvement to increased emphasis on driver training and the importance of crew rest, detailed convoy planning, and the consistent application of risk management prior to movement. We appreciate the opportunity to use the forthcoming Government Accountability Office findings on tactical vehicle safety to continue to improve our performance in this area.

A vital part of a healthy safety culture is the ability and willingness of Marines to report hazards and mishaps. While we are confident that Marines report our most serious mishaps, we know that lower-level mishap reporting is less reliable. There are also “near-miss” events that, when reported, could provide critical leading indicators that help identify hazards and prevent future mishaps. Based on the successful use of ASAP in our aviation community, we are testing a ground-oriented version of ASAP—the Marine Corps Safety Awareness Program (MCSAP). Like ASAP, MCSAP enables Marines to anonymously report unsafe conditions, near-miss events, and command climate concerns directly to the unit’s safety officer and commanding officer without fear of retribution. As previously noted in this statement, we have transitioned to the Department of the Navy’s Streamlined Incident Reporting system, which enables easier and more accurate ground mishap reporting, as well as better information sharing. We are also in the process of fielding an online “mishap library,” which will enable Marines to easily access

mishap lessons learned reports for personal and unit professional development. In total, by increasing the accessibility, willingness, and visibility of mishap reporting, the Marine Corps is enabling its leaders to identify trends and mitigate risks.

The Marine Corps is actively examining additional proposals to improve our safety performance. The Executive Safety Board, comprised of general officer leadership from across the Service, meets on a semiannual basis to provide the oversight, support, and resources that enable safety performance and readiness. We are also committed to pursuing technological advancements, data analytics, and training improvements that will bolster our Marines' ability to mitigate risks and safely accomplish their missions.

AAV Mishap

On July 30, 2020, an AAV sank off the coast of San Clemente Island, California, resulting in nine deaths. This was the deadliest AAV-related mishap in Marine Corps history. Due to the ongoing command investigation process, we are unable to release further information on the mishap at this time. We will release the command investigation once we have informed the next of kin of the investigation findings. The Marine Corps is committed to understanding how this incident occurred and preventing similar tragedies in the future. The eight Marines and one Sailor who lost their lives during this incident— Private First Class Bryan Baltierra, Lance Corporal Marco Barranco, Private First Class Evan Bath, Navy Hospital Corpsman Third Class Christopher Gnem, Private First Class Jack-Ryan Ostrovsky, Lance Corporal Guillermo Perez, Corporal Wesley Rodd, Lance Corporal Chase Sweetwood, and Corporal Cesar Villanueva— will never be forgotten.

CONCLUSION

The Marine Corps remains committed to ensuring the safety of our Marines, Sailors, and civilians as we train to be the Nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness. As of the date of this statement, we have had zero fatalities in aviation or ground training mishaps this fiscal year. We are working to maintain this as our standard. In order to do this, we will learn from our past, use lessons learned to extend positive trends, and create lasting institutional change. These actions will ensure the Marine Corps remains most ready when the Nation is least ready.