

Temptation to Gamble Is Near for Troops Overseas

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When Carrie Beth Walsh and her two toddlers landed at the airport in Seoul, South Korea, last year, there was no sign of her husband, an Army pilot who had been transferred there six weeks earlier.

He eventually showed up in a taxi, broke and unprepared for his family's arrival - no rental car for the drive to his base, no apartment, no credit cards in his wallet that were not already up against his loan limits. "He was making more than \$60,000 a year," Ms. Walsh said. "But we were always broke."

She soon learned why. Her husband, Warrant Officer Aaron W. Walsh, had pumped more than \$20,000 into the Army's own slot machines on bases in South Korea. Last month, his marriage and career shattered, Mr. Walsh, who is 33, resigned from the Army to avoid a court-martial on desertion charges stemming from his gambling habit.

Military gambling is a big business. About \$2 billion flows through military-owned slot machines at officers' clubs, activities centers and bowling alleys on overseas bases each year. Most flows back out as jackpots, but 6 percent remains with the house, about the same ratio as in Las Vegas.

Each year, the armed forces take in more than \$120 million from on-base slot machines and \$7 million from Army bingo games at home. These funds help pay for recreational programs for the troops.

But even military researchers have acknowledged that the armed forces are heavily populated by people who, like Aaron Walsh, may be especially vulnerable to gambling addiction: athletic, risk-taking young people who are experiencing severe stress and anxiety.

"And wartime is an environment that is probably creating more vulnerability than usual," said Christine Reilly, executive director of the gambling addiction research institute at Cambridge Health Alliance, a teaching institution for the Harvard Medical School.

More than four years ago, Congress ordered the Pentagon to study how on-base slot machines were affecting military families. The Pentagon initially hired PricewaterhouseCoopers to do the study, but it ended the contract after a few months and completed the study itself.

The final report provided no new data about the rate of problem gambling. But it did caution Congress that the military could not maintain many popular programs, like golf courses and family activity centers, "without slot machine revenue or a significant new source of cash."

One consultant who worked with PricewaterhouseCoopers was Rachel Volberg, a medical sociologist who runs Gemini Resources, which measures gambling rates around the world. "We met a great deal of defensiveness, both in Washington and on base," she said. "Everyone was very concerned that those revenues might go away."

She added: "Only the chaplains took this really seriously. They told us that one out of three people who come to them for counseling have a problem with gambling, but can't tell anyone because they will be dishonorably discharged."

Slot machines are "a very profitable operation," said Peter Isaacs, the chief operating officer of the Army's Community and Family Support Center, which runs the largest slot machine program. "But we do not operate them strictly to extract profit. Our soldiers have told us they want access to the same games and gambling opportunities available to the civilians they are defending."

The military is "very passive in our advertising, and we have low maximum jackpots," Mr. Isaacs continued. "We don't want to encourage people to blow the rent money chasing a \$1 million payout." He added, "The vast majority of the troops use the machines responsibly."

Despite research showing that service members are at least as vulnerable to compulsive gambling as civilians - even more vulnerable, some research suggests - the military spends little of its Congressional funding, and none of its gambling profits, on treatment for those whose gambling gets out of control.

The PricewaterhouseCoopers report to the Pentagon noted "a general lack of accessible treatment for gambling addiction," but that warning was not included in the Pentagon's final report to Congress.

It was echoed, however, in a little-noticed research paper written by a team of Navy and Marine Corps medical personnel last year, describing a gambling addiction program they started in Okinawa in January 2003.

"The fact that few treatment options exist for military personnel, their family members" and other personnel at overseas bases "is not disputed," the paper said. "Prior to the start of the present program in Okinawa, no formal overseas treatment options for pathological gambling existed."

The Okinawa program treated 35 patients in 2003. Most cited slot machines as their primary form of gambling, although five said they spent "significant time playing bingo" as well. Seven of them, or 20 percent, said they had considered suicide.

Although its leaders called the Okinawa program "quite promising," it no longer exists, according to a Navy spokesman.

Indeed, across the services, there is only one program that provides the preferred in-patient treatment for gambling addiction, at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, Calif.. The center handles about 25 cases a year. A few bases, including Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, rely on nearby veterans' hospitals or local Gamblers Anonymous chapters. But on most military bases, the search for treatment can be frustrating and futile.

Maj. Tami Dillahunt, a military lawyer at Camp Casey in South Korea, recently defended Pvt. Andrew Foster, a former chaplain's assistant, who was convicted of stealing money to gamble.

"He tried to get help," Major Dillahunt said. "He went to Army Community Services; they said they couldn't help and sent him to Mental Health Services. There, they said, 'No, we can't help you - go to your chaplain.' So he goes to his chaplain, who says he's not qualified to help with addiction and refers him to Army Community Services. It was a total runaround."

A senior legal officer also tried unsuccessfully to find treatment for Private Foster, Major Dillahunt said. "Private Foster wants treatment - he knows if he doesn't get help, he will return to gambling," she added. "It just is not available."

Mike Catanzaro, who runs the Camp Pendleton program, acknowledged that "many commands have never heard of us" and that little other treatment is available. "One of the major obstacles is that there is no policy or mandate to treat pathological gambling in the military, just as in the civilian community," he said.

Slot machines have been a fixture of military life for decades. They were banned from domestic military bases in 1951, after a series of scandals. They were removed from Army and Air Force bases in 1972, after more than a dozen people were court-martialed for skimming cash from slot machines in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

But 1,500 machines remained on Navy and Marine Corps bases overseas after that scandal, and in 1980, the Army and Air Force started to restore the machines at many of their overseas bases. The Marine Corps and Navy slot machine programs are now run by the Army; the Air Force still runs its own program.

Today, there are approximately 4,150 modern video slot machines at military bases in nine countries, according to Mr. Isaacs and an Air Force spokesman.

The Army bingo program, too, has a few small skeletons in its closet. In the 1990's, some bases outsourced their bingo games to private companies, which would bus in civilian players and share the profits with the base. After some local officials complained that the games violated state gambling laws, the Pentagon barred outsourcing and restricted bingo to on-base personnel "and their bona fide guests."

But while Army bingo operations are modest, they are twice as profitable as slot machines and produce an annual profit of about \$7 million on revenue of about \$45 million. Sixty percent of those bingo programs are small, but 11 of them collect average monthly revenue of more than \$100,000. Those include games at some of the giant bases deploying troops to Iraq - Fort Bragg in North Carolina, Fort Benning in Georgia and Fort Hood in Texas.

Some larger programs are beginning to embrace the new technology that is transforming bingo from a parlor game into a high-speed contest played on terminals that increasingly resemble slot machines.

By reducing labor costs, this technology makes the programs more efficient and profitable, according to Robert Glotfelty, a senior program analyst at the Army's Community and Family Service Center.

That is worrisome to some gambling experts because, they said, there is some evidence that faster play is more addictive for vulnerable players.

The military's best guess about how many service members are vulnerable comes from the Pentagon's Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Military Personnel, conducted departmentwide every two to three years.

The October 2003 survey showed that about 1.2 percent of all service members, or about 17,500 people, had reported five or more gambling problems over their lifetime, an indication of "probable pathological gambling." That roughly matches the rate for the civilian population.

But a number of gambling specialists say the survey may substantially understate the problem, and not just because of the demographics of the military population.

The methodology in the surveys "is out of date in a big way," Ms. Volberg said. Top military officials "say they have no gambling problem," she said. "But they haven't measured it in a way that's comparable to the way rates are measured in the civilian population."

Moreover, self-reporting surveys are poor tools for measuring behavior, like excessive gambling, that are "essentially criminalized in the military culture," said Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling in Arlington, Va.

So Private Foster, whose career is hanging by a thread, is serving out a six-month sentence in South Korea without treatment, Major Dillahunt said. "He's said he hoped to be sent to Iraq when he gets out, because there is no gambling there," she said.

Mr. Walsh, the helicopter pilot, was luckier. He was sent to Camp Pendleton for treatment after his wife discovered the program on the Internet. "No one in Korea had ever heard of it," she said.

Like 90 percent of all gambling addicts, Mr. Walsh washed out of his first try at treatment. He drove from the clinic to Las Vegas, overstayed his leave and lost \$18,000 before being arrested and sent back to Korea. By then, his wife had returned to her home in Maine to obtain a divorce.

His view is that slot machines should be removed from military bases. The military's explanation that slot machines are a recreational opportunity for the troops is "a bunch of bunk," he said. "It doesn't have anything to do with 'recreational opportunities.' It has everything to do with the money."

After his forced resignation, Mr. Walsh flew home and went directly to Las Vegas. Interviewed on a collect call from a pay phone there, Mr. Walsh said that he has now lost \$10,700, the last of his savings. "For nine days I've been sleeping on the streets," he said. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do. Most nights, I think about ending it all."

For help in the New Jersey Area:

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