

Drinking by enlisted men causes increasing waste



By WILLIAM L. CLAIBORNE
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WASHINGTON — More than three-quarters of the junior enlisted men in the Army and Navy have serious drinking problems, according to the results of a study issued by the Pentagon.

Forty-four per cent of a sample group of 9,500 Army men were classified as "problem drinkers" who went Absent Without Leave or otherwise missed work assignments because of drinking. Twenty-nine per cent of the group were classified as occasional heavy "binge" drinkers, while only 4 per cent were categorized as non-drinkers and 9 per cent were labeled as "drinkers with no problem."

Similar figures were offered by the Navy, which reported that 20 per cent of their enlisted men were "serious problem drinkers" and that only 21 per cent of the study group were rated as non-drinkers or "no problem" drinkers.

For many young enlisted men in the services, alcohol has replaced drugs as an abuse problem, according to Dr. Richard Wilbur, assistant secretary of defense for health and environment. The cost of alcohol abuse, Wilbur said, runs into millions of dollars in lost work time or reduced efficiency.

He said that in the fiscal year 1973 alone, the Army lost 2,200 "man years" of work as a result of alcohol abuse. The cost of this lost time in payroll and allowances alone was \$17 million, Wilbur said.

TOUGHER DEFINITION

During the same period, he said, the Army lost 16,000 "man years" in reduced efficiency because of late arrivals or early leaves attributed to hangovers. (A "man year" represents the total numbers of hours worked by one man during a calendar year.)

The definition of a "heavy drinker,"

according to Wilbur, is a person who takes five or more drinks a day four or more times a week, or takes 12 or more drinks one day a month, or drinks for more than a full day once in a three-year period.

An alcoholic, by the Pentagon's standards, is a person who has suffered or has been threatened by a loss of marriage, has severe financial instability or has lost his job because of drinking, or who is unable to function without alcohol.

Wilbur noted that the Pentagon's definition of a "heavy" drinker is substantially more severe than that used in civilian life. For instance, he said, a serviceman who drinks five bottles of beer containing 3.2 per cent alcohol daily for four days would be classified as a "heavy" drinker.

He also noted that servicemen often are classified as heavy drinkers as a result of trouble they get into in a highly confined living atmosphere, while civilians who

drink just as much in a more open society would not be so classified.

He said the services were taking some steps to reduce the likelihood of alcohol abuse, principally by shortening "happy hours" in service clubs here and abroad and by raising the prices of liquor in PXs.

MORE MEN TREATED

But, he added, "We're not about to embark on a campaign of prohibition because of this problem."

Wilbur quoted statistics which showed that the number of alcoholics treated in the services has risen drastically in the last year. For example, the Navy treated 817 men for alcoholism during the five years from 1967-1971, Wilbur said. However, in 1972 alone, he said, the Navy treated 1,059 alcoholics; in the first three months of 1973, he said, 484 alcoholics have been treated.

Part of this increase, Wilbur noted, resulted from the services' increased emphasis on alcohol treatment programs. Wilbur said nearly 11,000 Army enlisted men and officers have been treated for acute alcoholism since 1971. He said the monthly rate is increasing steadily. In the six years from 1966 to 1971, Wilbur said, the Air Force treated 366 alcoholics. In the calendar year of 1972 alone it treated 408 alcoholics, he said.

The statistics supplied by Wilbur showed far less severe drinking patterns by junior officers. There was an even lower rate of drinking for senior officers, according to the Pentagon statistics. Only 18 per cent of the junior officers and 13 per cent of the senior officers were said to have "serious" drinking problems, according to Wilbur.

"We have excellent programs which have largely controlled the drug abuse problems in the military," said Wilbur. "Now, we must concentrate more effort on problem drinkers who can be treated and restored to active duty."

He attributed heavy drinking in the services to social causes, the loneliness of family separation and job pressures.

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