

DUI prevention: everyone's business

By Maj. James Long

20th Component Maintenance Squadron

"I thought I was fine." Those five words are repeated by many DUI offenders who may also be killers. More airmen have been killed in the last year as a result of alcohol-related accidents than in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Agency, in a recent year, more than 15,000 people were killed in accidents involving drivers with a blood alcohol content of .08 or higher. That averages nearly one person each day, just in the small state of South Carolina. Airmen at Shaw are not exempt. One of our own was killed in an alcohol-related accident last year. DUIs this year are on a pace to exceed last year and it is up to all of us to help curb this trend **now**.

Through positive peer pressure, we all can make a difference! Most of our offenders don't drink alone; they go out with friends, coworkers or family. If some friends are going out for a night on the town and they are drinkers, there is nothing to stop you from asking, "How are you getting home?" In fact, it is your duty to ask. That one question may lead to a plan that could save a life. If the answer is, "We'll figure it out later," challenge them until a plan is formed. You don't want to be the one that could have prevented a tragedy, but chose not to get involved.

Tragedies caused by drunk driving include both the loss of life and career ending injuries. A former Airman said, "I wish I could take that one decision back." He can't because he ran a red light while driving with a .21 BAC, and now two innocent people are dead. He is serving two consecutive 6-12 year prison terms for their deaths. Before he got into his vehicle that night, he told his friend, "I'm OK." He wasn't! His remorse will never bring the young couple back, will never make their families whole again, nor will it ever allow him to achieve his goal to become a state trooper. A similar event could have easily happened here at Shaw.

Each of us are shaped by our life experiences and the ability to learn from the mistakes of others. This is especially important as we work to curb the number of DUIs we are experiencing. Most of us know a story of how a drunk driver impacted our family, friends, a schoolmate, coworker or ourselves. We must use those stories to teach others and make the fight against drunk driving reach a personal level. We have and will continue to give/receive safety briefs, but we must extend our efforts to reach out at a personal level to highlight the effects of drunk driving. Tell your stories at roll calls, in the breakroom, in the dorms, at your house. Your story may be the one seed of doubt that prevents someone from saying "I think I'm fine."

While in high school, a schoolmate of mine was killed. Our fathers worked together at an Air Force base hospital. Darrin and a friend had been drinking and "thought they were fine." Traveling at a speed of at least 60 MPH on a tree-lined winding road in South Florida, they lost control of the vehicle and crashed into a tree and then into a stone wall. They both were killed instantly. Darrin's parents were out of town for the night and my father had the duty of identifying the body. Upon Darrin's parents' return, my father spent a day convincing them they didn't want to see their son as the damage to his body was severe and it would be better remembering him as he was prior to the accident. To this day, my father hasn't fully described the condition of Darrin's body. Darrin's death had a devastating impact on his father, mother and little sister.

It is an individual responsibility not to drive drunk, but we all have a stake in preventing drunk driving. Positive peer pressure and making drunk driving a personal issue through impacting stories are vital to curing our number of DUIs and, in turn, the number of fatalities caused by drunk driving. I challenge each of you to do something in your workplace or dorm and make a difference. Prevent yourself or your friends/coworkers from saying "I thought I was fine."

Court-martial conviction

A Shaw Airman was convicted and imprisoned for his negligence in causing a motorcycle crash that killed his passenger, while both were under the influence of alcohol.

On March 26, 2003, Airman 1st Class Justin Dooley, 20th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron crew chief, was found guilty of negligent homicide under Article 134, Uniform Code of Military Justice. The general court-martial panel of five officer members sentenced him to confinement for six months, reduction to the rank of airman basic, hard labor without confinement for three months, restriction to the limits of Shaw for two months, forfeiture of \$1193 pay per months for six months, and a reprimand.

On the evening of May 31, 2003, Airman Dooley and his passenger, Airman 1st Class William McElroy, 20th AMXS, attended a party near Shaw. According to witnesses, both were drinking alcohol. At approximately 4 a.m. the next day, they rode on Airman Dooley's motorcycle to get more beer, according to a statement Airman Dooley gave investigators after the crash. Airman Dooley had only a motorcycle beginner's permit, which did not allow him to drive at that time of night.

Airman Dooley did not complete a motorcycle safety course. At the time of the crash, the motorcycle was traveling between 13 and 25 mph more than the speed limit, according to an accident reconstruction expert who testified at the court martial. The investigation showed the motorcycle slid 595 feet after he lost control. Airman McElroy's body was found more than 400 feet from the point where he was thrown from the motorcycle. Airman Dooley was injured in the crash as well.

A medical blood-alcohol test conducted an hour and a half after the wreck showed Airman Dooley's blood-alcohol level to be 0.093. Both individuals were wearing only pajamas; neither was wearing helmets or other safety gear.

The federal conviction will adversely impact Airman Dooley's ability to secure civilian employment with any federal agency, state agencies, all law enforcement, or any other organization that conducts background investigations on potential employees.

His conviction and sentence will be reviewed by Shaw's General Court-Martial Convening Authority (9 AF/CC) and The Air Force Judge Advocate General. (Information courtesy of 20th Fighter Wing Legal Office.)

The Shaw Spirit

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