

U.S. Marine Corps' Lax Weapon Safety on Okinawa

Jon Mitchell

A series of incidents — including the theft of an M16 in 2014 and numerous attempts to board civilian aircraft carrying live ammunition last year — has raised concerns that the U.S. military on Okinawa is failing to manage securely its weapons in Japan.

Documents obtained from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) under the Freedom of Information Act reveal how a marine, believed to be a Chief Warrant Officer 3, stole an automatic rifle and bullets, barricaded himself within his home and threatened to kill himself and possibly a fellow service member.

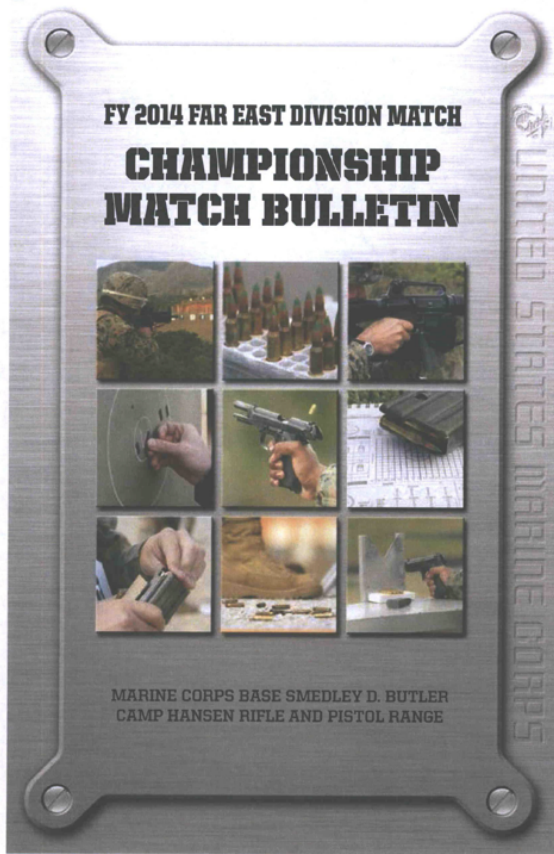
The documents catalog a series of security failures which enabled the marine to commit the act, such as errors at the armory and suggestions that past mental problems had been ignored by senior officers. The perpetrator received a relatively light punishment for his actions: a written warning and a pay-cut.

M16 rounds stolen by marine. (NCIS)

According to the NCIS reports, on the morning of 30 October 2014, the marine, drove to Camp Hansen, Kin Town. At the installation's shooting range, he stole ten rounds of M16 ammunition from a technician's table. Although USMC policy normally requires marines leaving the range to be checked with a pat-down and handheld metal detector, no such precautions were taken.

After stealing the ammunition, the marine drove to the armory at Camp Foster, central Okinawa. He explained to the armorer he wanted an M16 rifle so that he could practice dry-firing it for a shooting tournament. According to the report, the marine "should not have had a rifle issued to him" but, because of his relatively high rank, he was given one. At the same time, the marine also requested a magazine clip which would have enabled him to fire several bullets consecutively. However, his request was denied when he refused to hand over his military identification card.





Camp Hansen shooting tournament. (USMC)

With the rifle and ammunition, the marine then drove to nearby Camp Lester. There he entered his house and locked himself in one of the bathrooms. At 8:40 a.m. he telephoned a colleague and explained he was armed and suggested he was about to kill himself. The colleague alerted the military police and drove to the home of the marine.

Upon arrival, the marine warned his colleague he might be hurt if he tried to enter the bathroom. Reports from the NCIS investigators describe this as a threat to shoot the colleague, but according to a later statement from the colleague himself, it might have meant the M16 would accidentally discharge if the colleague attempted to disarm him.

Following the arrival of the military police, NCIS and negotiators, the marine surrendered at 12:54 p.m. without any shots being fired. The rifle and ten rounds of ammunition were recovered from the scene.

After his arrest, the marine explained he hadn't committed suicide because he didn't have a magazine. He said he wanted to fire a "three round burst" to ensure he killed himself. The reports also suggest he had swallowed a number of unidentified pills.

According to the NCIS documents, for the next two weeks, the marine was held at the mental health clinic of the United States Navy Hospital, Camp Foster. On 26 February 2015, he was tried under a Non-Judicial Punishment hearing which, unlike a court martial, is usually reserved for minor offenses. At the trial, he pled guilty to several violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and received a 50% pay-cut for two months and a letter of reprimand.

Asked why the marine had been handed a relatively lenient punishment, John Severns, Deputy Director of Public Affairs for U.S. Forces Japan replied by email, "As a matter of policy, we do not comment on administrative or non-judicial punishments."

In response to an enquiry on the security failings which allowed the marine to steal the M16 and ammunition, Severns wrote, "U.S. forces have robust measures in place to ensure that weapons are properly controlled and accounted for. We routinely review our procedures in light of events and new information, and when appropriate we make changes."

According to a statement made to the NCIS by the marine's colleague, the 2014 incident was not the first time he had suffered mental issues. In 2012, the marine had sought mental health support from the military but instead of being helped, "he was given a weapon and deployed

to Afghanistan.”

Citing privacy concerns, Severns declined to comment on the issue.

At the time of the incident, which occurred approximately 150 meters from an off-base residential area, U.S. military officials did not notify local authorities about the barricade situation. Noguni Masaharu, Mayor of Chatan, told the media, “Depending on the mental state and motivation of the marine, the incident could have endangered local citizens. I am very concerned about the situation because no details were disclosed.”

In the U.S., there have been a number of on-base shootings by military-related personnel who were suffering from mental problems.

In September 2013, a Navy veteran shot dead 12 people at Washington Navy Yard, District of Columbia, before being killed by police.¹ In April 2014, on the U.S. Army’s Fort Hood, Texas, a soldier suffering from mental issues shot dead three service members and injured 16 others. The perpetrator committed suicide before he could be arrested.²

According to U.S. government data, the suicide rate among active and retired military personnel is far higher than in the civilian population. Pentagon reports show 265 active service members killed themselves in 2015; the Department of Veterans Affairs reported 20 veterans killed themselves on average every day in 2014.³ The rate for male veterans is 18% higher than in the similarly-aged male civilian population and for females the rate is 240% higher.

In addition to the barricade incident in 2014, problems with USMC weapon controls on Okinawa were highlighted in a report by the Inspector General of the Department of Defense in 2011.⁴ Between February 2010 and February 2011, a government team visited 22 USMC armories in the prefecture to check

whether their stockpile of 21,581 small arms – defined as including pistols, machine guns and rocket launchers – was correctly stored.



Marines at Camp Hansen. (USMC)

According to the report, 14 of the 22 armories did not maintain accurate data and discrepancies totaled 1,080. Problems included failure to register weapons or keep daily records of weapon transfers. There was at least one case in which armorers had not cataloged a weapons shipment from Okinawa to a base in the U.S.

Department of Defense inspectors criticized the USMC for not providing personnel with adequate training and the report concluded weapons’ storage “accountability and security

guidance was incomplete and inconsistent.” Such failings, warned the report, put the armories at risk of theft or loss of small arms.

The USMC admitted that arsenal personnel were inexperienced and unfamiliar with weapons storage systems. They stated they would improve procedures.

In 2017, there were a series of incidents related to U.S. military weapons safety on Okinawa. In that year, at least five service members were arrested at Okinawa’s Naha Airport for attempting to carry live rounds on board civilian flights. On March 30, for example, a USMC staff sergeant was detained when x-rays of his hand luggage revealed 13 bullets. He was arrested for violations of the Firearm and Sword Control Law.⁵

Meanwhile at Camp Hansen last April, the USMC was forced temporarily to halt live-fire training following incidents where bullets strayed into a civilian construction site within the installation. The rounds damaged a water tank and a worker’s car at Afuso Dam. In

response to the incidents, the Okinawa Defense Bureau lodged a complaint with the U.S. military.⁶

An earlier version of this article appeared in [The Japan Times](#) on 21 June 2017 under the title, “U.S. military under fire for gun safety breaches on Okinawa.”

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Notes

¹ Michael D. Shear and Michael S. Schmidt, [Gunman and 12 Victims Killed in Shooting at D.C. Navy Yard](#), New York Times, September 16, 2013.

² Tom Dart and Spencer Ackerman, [Fort Hood shooting: four dead and 16 injured at Texas army base](#), Guardian, April 3, 2014.

³ Office of Suicide Prevention, [Suicide Among Veterans and Other Americans](#), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, August 3, 2016.

⁴ Department of Defense, [Marine Corps Inventory of Small Arms Was Generally Accurate but Improvements Are Needed for Related Guidance and Training](#) (Report No. D-2011-060), Inspector General, April 22, 2011.

⁵ [Jitsudan shoji yougi de beihei taiho nahakuukou](#) (U.S. service member arrested for

possession of live ammunition, Naha airport), Sankei West, March 30, 2017.

⁶ [Marine Corps investigating bullet strikes at on-base construction site on Okinawa](#), Stars and Stripes, April 18, 2017.