

**mishap**

LESSONS LEARNED

MISHAP SUMMARY

Mishap

Class A - On Duty

Damage

None

Injury

One (1) Marine deceased

Operation

Training - Swimming Assessment,
MCB Camp Pendleton

DISCLAIMER

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Accidental Drowning During Training

SUMMARY

Prior to commencing a formal Period of Instruction (POI), Marines participated in an assessment of their physical aptitude and skill.



The assessment consisted of morning shore-based physical training and an afternoon swimming skills check including: a 500 meter timed lap swim, 25 meter underwater cross-over, 30 foot tower entry, and 30 minute water tread (wearing utilities). During the shore-based physical training portion, the mishap victim (MV) was observed vomiting as a result of strenuous exertion. Approximately four hours after completing the morning portion of the assessment the Marines were seated in the bleachers and received a safety brief from the Sergeant Instructor who reviewed safety procedures, the emergency action plan, Drop on Request (DOR), and Training Time Out (TTO) procedures. The MV was observed having difficulty with the 500m timed lap swim but successfully completed that and all other events preceding the 30 minute tread without assistance

or intervention. During the water tread evaluation, instructors identified the mishap victim's head above the surface, and approximately 15 minutes into the event, the instructors pulled the MV out of the water. The MV was evaluated by the on-site corpsman and asked if he desired to continue training. Cleared and desiring to continue the assessment, the MV was coached on proper treading techniques and reentered the pool under close supervision of an instructor on the deck and one in the water. At approximately the 20 minute mark, the mishap victim's head submerged two times and the safety swimmer pulled him to surface. When the MV's head submerged for the third time, the Water Safety Officer directed him to be pulled from the water and he was assisted to the side of the pool and pulled onto the drain board by two other instructors. Upon exiting the pool the MV was responsive but soon lost consciousness. The instructors immediately initiated casualty procedures, placing the mishap victim in a recovery position and calling for the corpsman. The Emergency Action Plan was activated, EMS was called, and the corpsman, assisted by the instructors, conducted rescue breathing with oxygen administration and CPR. EMS arrived at the scene within 12 minutes and took over victim care. The MV never regained consciousness and was pronounced dead at the scene. An autopsy determined drowning to be the cause of death.

CONCLUSIONS

- The direct cause of this Marine's death was drowning due to persistent inhalation of water during the event.
- Instructors failed to adequately recognize an active drowning victim. The instructors identified the mishap victim as a weak swimmer, but did not identify him as a potential drowning victim until it was too late. Identification of an active drowning victim is ill-defined and rehearsed in current MCIWS doctrine and training, instead relying on the experience and judgment of the water safety personnel.
- The assessment was not part of a published POI or High Risk Training (HRT) Master Lesson File (MLF), but included HRT protocols like TTO and DOR. The inclusion of these protocols was intended as additional layers of safety but the informal nature of the assessment left these protocols open to interpretation by students and instructors. The loose understanding and articulation of the policies by the lead instructor led to the erroneous perception that exiting the pool or calling for a TTO during the thirty minute water tread constituted a DOR.
- The assessment criteria exceeded the minimum prerequisites for the formal POI and the level of water survival training accomplished during basic training. This self-imposed gap in skill requirement and expectation coupled with the informal training standards and protocols created a zero defect atmosphere in a high risk training evolution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Training curricula that require physical assessments, evaluations, or involve any High Risk Training should begin with a formal check-in process that includes a review/verification of individual training records and a medical questionnaire. All participants should be informed of the requirements of the training program, expectations (assessments versus evaluations), hazards, and the Drop-On-Request/Training-Time-Out policies prior to participating in any physical training.
- Inventory assessments should not exceed the minimum prerequisite of the POI and should follow the same training and risk management protocols as those required by the corresponding program. Marines assessing directly from basic recruit training are limited in their ability to maintain perishable skills or conduct individual preparation for more advanced assessments, placing them at higher risk in more challenging physical training environments.
- If additional assessments are necessary to determine a Marine's aptitude, those assessments should be formalized as part of the POI with a High Risk Training Master Lesson File as appropriate. Assessment and TTO/DOR criteria should be clearly defined for all phases and be used to determine what skills a Marine should remediate and where they belong in a "crawl, walk, run" training continuum. Instructors and safety personnel bear the responsibility for understanding and adhering to the assessment criteria, reiterating the purpose of an assessment vice evaluation, and to stop Marines from training beyond their capabilities.
- Marine Corps Water Survival School (MCWSS) should apply the lessons of this mishap to its curriculum and include more instruction on the causes and signs of drowning, as well as direct periodic aquatic physiology and drowning identification training for instructors. Additionally, MCWSS in conjunction with medical personnel should determine if additional physiological assessments (listening to lungs, higher oxygen saturation levels, etc.) could more accurately identify a struggling swimmer as an active drowning victim.