With the goal of helping Marines and Sailors better transition to life back home after deployment, the Marine Corps is currently piloting its new high-adventure outdoor recreation program – Operation Adrenaline Rush (OAR) – at MCAS Yuma, Ariz., and MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C.

“At the request of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) programs were challenged to ensure that service members returning from deployments were provided recreational activities within structured venues that promote safety and help to reduce high risk/destructive behaviors,” explains Nancy Dussault, Outdoor Recreation program specialist, Marine Corps Headquarters, Semper Fit and Exchange Services Division.

OAR is a Marine Corps program based on the principles of Return and Recreate, a concept born from the collective minds of Armed Forces recreation professionals and OSD personnel at one of the annual Armed Forces Recreation Network Professional Training Institute (PTI) conferences, held each year in conjunction with the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Congress and Expo.

“The Army’s Warrior Adventure Quest (WAQ) program was also used as a guide when developing OAR,” notes Dussault. “Forts Carson, Hood and Bragg graciously provided training resources along with contacts to their program specialists in the field.”

Like the Army, the Marine Corps realizes the importance of providing high-adrenaline activities for service members who are returning from deployment.

Combined with Combat Operational Stress Control (COSC) principles, which encompass programs to prevent, identify and holistically help heal mental injuries caused by combat or other operations, OAR “helps identify and manage stress levels in individuals and units with an outdoor recreation high-adrenaline activity to aid in mitigating boredom and high-risk/destructive behaviors of recently deployed Marines and Sailors,” notes Dussault.

She points out that unit leaders are given a two-hour
briefing consisting of COSC principles and an introduction to the activity. “During this briefing, unit leaders learn skills needed to deliver the training to their unit: leader commitment; COSC principles; Esprit de Corps and unit cohesion; skills for a successful After Action Review; and the concept of OAR.”

The unit leaders then conduct a one-hour briefing to the Marines participating in the OAR activity, consisting of the COSC principles; safety related to AOR activities; and a link between the high adventure activity they will be participating in and unit cohesion. In addition, Outdoor Recreation staff provides an overview of the recreational activity, appropriate attire, equipment to be used and a safety briefing.

“By introducing them to structured activities with an adrenaline rush, this program introduces fun recreational ways in learning coping skills for managing combat experiences,” says Dussault. “By mitigating this stress we hope to decrease the likelihood of an off-duty mishap. This program provides a mechanism to aid in both the individual and unit’s re-integration from a deployed environment to a garrison. This program also introduces Marines to outdoor recreation activities that they can participate in with their families and friends during their off-duty time.”

With funding supplied by OSD, each of the two pilot bases, MCAS Yuma and MCB Camp Lejeune, purchased a variety of equipment to supplement their Outdoor Recreation programs, including all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), side-by-side vehicles, paintball equipment as well as motor boats, kite boards and other water sport equipment. Funding was also used to contract the high adventure activities with reputable local businesses.

Some outdoor recreation activities have included zip lining, white water rafting, water sports, paintball, deep-sea fishing, kayaking, mountain biking, ropes course, rock climbing, snowboarding and skiing.

“We have been very fortunate to receive additional funding to help sustain the program over the next five years,” notes Dussault. “Plans for the immediate continuation of OAR include reviewing activities currently offered for cost effectiveness, expansion of the program to other Marine Corps bases and assisting the Navy with their efforts to develop a similar program for Sailors.”

Marine Corps Semper Fit and Recreation is also working to restructure the delivery of programs and services to Marines by consolidating resources to directly reach the units.

“This trend has been identified as Unit Recreation,” says Dussault. “It supports reaching the greatest number of Marines with the resources available to promote the resiliency of Marines.”

HIGH ADVENTURE IN YUMA

MCAS Yuma is currently piloting the OAR program, providing a variety of different activities, including all-terrain vehicle (ATV) riding activities (trail or track); mountain biking (downhill or cross country); paintball (scenario or speed ball); and water activities (wakeboarding, paddle boarding, jet skis, jet boats, tubing, water skiing, rafting and kayaking (sea or white water).

“Units pick their activity of participation,” notes MCAS Yuma Semper Fit Director Adrian Villalobos. “Preferences have been more seasonal and weather based. If it is hot, the Marines would prefer to be at the lake using the water equipment. If it is a cooler day, preference is generally on the rock wall, paintball field, in a side by side or on a dirt bike or ATV.”

To date, MCAS Yuma Outdoor Recreation department employees have completed training requirements to include: Leave No Trace (an outdoor recreation concept that aspires to conserve and preserve nature); Open Water Rescue; Wilderness First Responder (WIFR); dirt bike and ATV training; Challenge Course Facilitator; Arizona Fish and Game Boating; and Rock Climbing and Kayaking Instructor courses.

“Our trained employees include an onsite certified mechanic (and an outdoor recreational programmer with a proven track record of success), which made MCAS Yuma an attractive pilot program site,” explains Villalobos. “MCAS Yuma has proven that we can sustain the level of growth required to secure the success of OAR, with the support of our MCCS Director David Koopmann, who has allowed MCAS Yuma the opportunity to unroll the OAR pilot program. He continues to encourage the growth of the outdoor recreation programs for the Marines, family members and retirees here.”
He points out that funding has allowed Outdoor Recreation Director Bill Cardenas to make “well-researched and educated” equipment purchases with all-inclusive gear and programming.

“These elements have helped to make OAR a successful program for all Marines at MCAS Yuma, including our wounded warriors,” notes Villalobos. “Having the most current and correct tools, and providing training for all outdoor recreational professionals involved in this program, continues to improve the professionalism in the outdoor recreation field among DoD employees.”

He points out that for Marines coming home from deployment, high-adrenaline recreational activities provide a time for decompression and promote resiliency through a healthy, fun outlet.

“These activities also foster camaraderie within units with constructive communication throughout the recreational experience,” he says. “These activities also provide a skill for future use of recreational equipment as well as knowledge of how to safely and appropriately create a type of heightened fun with fellow Marines, along with educating Marines on safety with recreational equipment.”

For Marines who have gone through the OAR program already, many have provided positive comments and feedback (see sidebar).

“The most common question amongst the participating Marines is, ‘When and how can we do this again?’” notes Villalobos. “Requests to participate in similar future activities and outings have increased (in conjunction with overall outdoor recreation program use), as a result of the OAR program. Operation Adrenaline Rush is proving to be an excellent program that benefits resiliency through re-integration, maintaining combat readiness and integrating COSC principles. I would highly recommend this program to be rolled out Marine Corps-wide.”

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Below are some comments from service members who have participated in OAR, courtesy of Marine Corps Headquarters:

“This was hands-down the most fun activity I have ever had with my unit. I’ve never enjoyed myself this much since I’ve been in the Marine Corps. All activities tested individual skill and agility while having a great time building unit cohesion.”

– E-4 (National Whitewater Center, N.C.)

“This is an outstanding program and I wish it was around sooner. It has been a big help to me personally.”

– E-6 (Lake Martinez, Ariz.)

“During the rounds, I was put in situations that took me [back] to Afghanistan. But actually getting into a battle with other players, hearing the shot and then the ball pass by your head – it got my stress level elevated and my adrenaline pumping. I would recommend this program to anyone returning from deployment.”

– E-4 (Paintball)

“Just being able to get away from the base with the Marines in this platoon – I thought this was a great way to burn off stress.”

– E-2 (Deep Sea Fishing)

“This was a tremendous success for me and my Marines! This program directly impacts and builds Esprit de Corps, personal relations and unit cohesiveness. Do not get rid of programs like this … it’s a great way to relieve stress and show Marines you can have fun without alcohol and other destructive behaviors.”

– E-2 (National Whitewater Center)

“I highly recommend and encourage all units to take this opportunity. OAR provides a variety of events that are outside of what a unit is able to put together normally. This event definitely taught us to value agencies available to us aboard base.”

– E-6 (Paintball)