

# I Lost Control

## One Sailor's Struggle with Alcohol Abuse

*By Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jonathan Pankau*

I did not join the Navy on a winning streak. The 9/11 terrorist attack did not move me to fight the War on Terrorism, and I did not watch *Top Gun* in its entirety until I joined the Navy.

My mother kicked me out of the house after an arrest and countless teary-eyed conversations at the family table concerning my drinking. Drunk and homeless, I suddenly found myself sitting across from a Navy recruiter, one of the only smart decisions I made during that period of my life. He described the Navy in grand terms, gesturing in sweeping motions with his hands and arms, which were accentuated by the colorful tattoos serving as a visual history of his Navy career.

He described Tokyo, Singapore, Italy, and oh the places I could go! I was enchanted with the idea and he placed me under the wing of a senior chief culinary specialist. I think the only reason he pushed me through was my high ASVAB score. Suffering from the delusion that the Navy would solve all of my problems and the promise that I would be allowed to write news stories as a career, I took the oath. I had it half right.

Drinking was so ingrained in my daily life that I carried it with me into the Navy. My father was diagnosed with liver and pancreatic cancer, a death sentence at the time, when I was 12. He battled it for about two years until he passed away in 2001. One would think after watching a

close family member wither away, his body eaten up from aggressive chemotherapy and a more aggressive cancer, I wouldn't pick up the torch. Normal people would probably shy away from drinking or at least treat booze with a healthy respect. Guys like me start drinking after that. I used his death as an excuse to drink exactly the way I wanted to: uncontrollably.

Sometimes I could drink a couple of beers, play video games, and go to sleep. Other times I would unpredictably black out at the most inopportune times, and the people around me identified this behavior as normal.

The Navy didn't cause my alcohol abuse. I brought it with me. No Sailor initiated my alcohol abuse, no overbearing chief or leading petty officer, no long deployments or crazy working hours. I would tell everyone that these were the things that set me off and made me drink. Truthfully, beer and liquor just had to be present to set me off. Alcohol already ran my life prior to me joining. I just lied to myself and maintained that lie in front of others.

Authority figures started sitting me down and talking to me about my drinking and encouraged me to talk to the ship's drug and alcohol program advisor (DAPA). A normal person would equate

these conversations with the same conversations spent at the family table with a teary-eyed mother sitting across from me. But I was too far-gone. When my mother died, that was it, the last push I needed to justify my behavior.

A DUI and a brig stint were among my first eye-opening experiences. Real consequences resulting from my drinking and my behavior finally caught up with me.

Deployment was a painfully polarizing experience for me. At first I welcomed the chance to sober up and clear my head. Eventually the separation of alcohol and I evolved into a bitter spat ending on terms of attrition rather than choice. Though I did not make the connection at the time, I was so dependent upon alcohol that staying sober for a significant period of time was uncomfortable for me. I had two glasses of wine in Florence, Italy, and I used the fact that I did not spontaneously combust to justify more drinking. This new bender coupled with the recent memory of my DUI cleared the path for me to take the Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Program (SARP) seriously.

Prior to SARP I thought people who stopped drinking were either prudes or just weak minded. I learned it takes a concerted effort to end up in a substance abuse treatment center, and that there were men and women who could not control their drinking, no matter how much effort they applied.

Apparently, I was one of the special few. My age, the amount of alcohol I drank during binges, even the length of my drinking career had very little to do with my condition.

Fortunately SARP had certain tools they deployed for cases like mine, and I realized I was not such a hopeless case anymore. I continued following the plan outlined for me and soon I was a triple-warfare qualified Sailor receiving the early promotion evaluations my chief aboard Nassau always ripped up after an inevitable

screw up. My wife, the same girlfriend who stood by me through the series of drunken outbursts related to my mother's death, was soon pregnant and happy about it. She was confident in my ability to be a father, and we are now expecting another baby in April. At my current command I serve as my division's leading petty officer as a second class petty officer, training my first class replacement. I am an assistant command fitness leader (ACFL) and the president of my command's Coalition of Sailors Against Destructive Decision's chapter.

I owe SARP and the Navy a debt and this is how I try to repay it. Because of my new way of life, I can be a warning and an example to Sailors currently struggling with drinking. My only hope is that my story will shed light on someone else's torment with alcohol.

*Note from Navy Alcohol and Drug Prevention office:* You've worked hard for your career as a Sailor. Only one-third of 17 to 24 year olds in the United States are even eligible for Navy service, and even fewer are capable of enduring the physical and emotional challenges of being a Sailor. From boot camp to advancement exams, job training and deployments, you have conquered them all through hard work, sacrifice and dedication.

Making responsible drinking choices is an extension of that dedication. Just one bad decision while drinking alcohol can jeopardize everything you've earned. Sailors involved in alcohol related incidents face serious consequences, including:

- Loss of rank, rate or pay
- Separation from the Navy
- Civilian consequences, such as fines and jail time

Irresponsible drinking not only threatens your health and career, it threatens the Navy's ability to be mission-ready.