

Military uses slot machines to fund overseas recreation

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- U.S. military has thousands of slot machines on overseas bases
- The slots generate well over \$100 million; funds used for recreation activities
- Critic charges that the military shouldn't use vice to pay for such programs
- Military stands by its slot machines

By Drew Griffin and Kathleen Johnston
CNN

BANGOR, Maine (CNN) -- Carrie Walsh's husband was a decorated Apache helicopter pilot for the U.S. Army. But years ago, Aaron Walsh started playing slot machines on military bases. He became a gambling addict. It eventually ruined his military career.

Then last fall, with his life in a tailspin, the 34-year-old walked into the Maine woods, put a gun to his head and killed himself -- after what his wife says was one final "gambling binge."

"The military has this culture of taking care of their own," says Carrie Walsh. "But it seems like when it comes to this, they just, you know, profited from his addiction and then threw him away."

There are thousands of slot machines on military bases overseas. The military says the revenue from the slots -- well over \$100 million annually -- is used to fund recreation programs overseas, such as swimming pools, movie theaters and concerts.

Critics say it is an outrage that the military, which has a budget of more than \$500 billion this fiscal year, takes money from the pockets of its troops and runs slot machines that generate revenues that equal a medium-sized Las Vegas casino operation.

"The military should not be a predator on its own soldiers and their families," says John Kindt, a business professor at the University of Illinois who has spent years studying the matter. "To be a predator of their own people that are serving their country is outrageous."

Earlier this year, Kindt issued a report titled "Gambling with Terrorism and U.S. Military Readiness" that blasted the military's gaming machines. He says many soldiers trapped in overseas posts can ill afford access to gambling machines.

Kindt says people drawn to military life are predisposed to become gambling addicts. They're generally young and they're risk-takers, he says. He adds that those type-A personalities are the "ones most likely to get hooked."

About 2.2 percent of military personnel have indicators of probable pathological gambling, he says, compared with about 0.77 to 1.6 percent in the general population.

Military: Slots are needed

Rich Gorman, the Army's point man on recreational activities, says there are 3,000 slot machines for the Army and Marines, bringing in \$130 million. The number of gaming machines for the Air Force and Navy weren't immediately disclosed. (Back in 1999, the last time numbers were made available, the Pentagon said it ran 8,000 slot machines on 94 overseas bases and posts.)

Gorman disagrees with critics like Kindt who say military personnel are more apt to get hooked on gambling. Gorman said military personnel are no more likely to be addicted to gambling than anyone else.

Undersecretary of Defense Leslye Arsht, in a statement to CNN, said the machines on bases and posts provide "a controlled alternative to unmonitored host-nation gambling venues and offers a higher payment percentage making it more entertainment oriented than that found at typical casinos."

"Department of Defense policy authorizes the military services to operate gaming and/or other amusement machines in overseas locations only, unless prohibited by host-country laws or agreements," Arsht said.

As for Carrie Walsh, she says her husband struggled with gambling from the outset. Aaron Walsh had gone through one marriage and a suicide attempt after getting hooked on slots at a base in Germany, she says.

His addiction continued after the couple got married and moved to a base in South Korea, with him tearing through his military paychecks and maxing out his credit cards.

After he got in trouble for missing work and was grounded, his wife got fed up and headed back home to Maine.

She says the military did try to help her husband "when it became apparent that he had a problem." He checked into the military's only gambling treatment program at Camp Pendleton in California, a program that has since shut down. But it did little good.

Aaron Walsh was eventually kicked out of the military in September 2005 because of his addiction problems. A few months later, he turned up in Maine. Then one night last fall, he made his way to a civilian casino in Bangor, before killing himself.

"He had been doing really well staying away from it, and I think that he went and had like a gambling binge, and then realized what he had done and decided he wasn't ever going to get better," she said.