

# **SPECIFIC STRESS PROBLEMS IN ELITE UNITS ON FOREIGN MISSIONS**

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**Psychosomatics seem to be a good indicator of the stress level in a unit. This may be the best and easiest detector of changes in stress levels in elite units on foreign missions. General knowledge about stress is important. Most armed forces now take care of that. There are the classical stress management approaches, mainly directed at leadership, unit cohesion, identification of external stressors and general morale boosting measures. Additionally, starting from the physical well-being approach, personalized stress management training, given at platoon level, is being tried out, in the Belgian army.**

## **Introduction**

Many bizarre physical symptoms, unexplainable strictly by organic medicine, can be explained psychologically. Especially in Elite Units on foreign missions this is a warning signal to be heeded. Already during their training on home ground there can be telltale signs. Usually those complaints seem to be due to somatization<sup>1</sup> of stress and unhappiness of the troops. Those problems will, cumulatively, interfere with the operational efficacy of the unit. If those warning signals are not taken seriously in time we risk a progressive escalation of problems. With growing distress the more fragile people will go further through somatization, go in for drinking and drugs, depression or aggression, desert ... There is no fixed schedule in this: some people go for one way of trying to compensate for their inner stress, and finally decompensate, others go for other ways.

People usually tend to decompensate in a fixed way. Probably they discover some way of coping with their internal unrest, and pain early in life and later in life they keep to it, even if it is later proven dangerous or lethal like .i.e. cigarettes, alcohol and drugs.

From personal contacts with the colleagues at Unit Level I learned that the morning sick call is an informal measuring instrument of the Unit's well-being. If there are more people than on average days, if the complaints are vague, general, with little respect for anatomic reality, are clearly somatiza-

tions, it's a sign that the Unit suffers from too much stress. This could be a good early warning signal, alas command too often discounts it, which in a way is correct, as work-dodging, malingering, pretending etc. ... by analysis of individual cases it will normally show up the weaker elements of the Unit, a possible reason to discount the phenomenon. A better reaction is to heed those early warning signs and wonder about what stressors are at work in the Unit before the next stages of more dangerous mental decompensation are reached.

A useful approach is to think firstly about the nature and possible impact of what can be called external and internal stress<sup>2</sup>. Then we can look at some explanations of possible stress accumulation in Elite Units. Finally some direct practical approaches can be tried to reach the individual, to make him/her aware of this stress level and to teach him/her how to deal with it at the individual and patrol level.

## **I STRESS IN THE ELITE UNITS**

It's useful, in an operational way of thinking, to distinguish between external and internal stressors.

1 - External stress has been acknowledged by the military as far as armies go. Sun Tzu<sup>3</sup> already talks extensively about the importance of the lay of the land, the climate and other external factors ... The English army in Lord Kitchener's 1898 Sudanese Mahdi campaign did everything it could to get the soldiers used to the Egyptian climate. However for a long time western military planners considered mainly the physical hardship of the troops under exterior stressors like the Russian Winter of 1812 for Napoleon or tropical bacteria, viruses and in colonial, tropical fighting. Even if Sun Tzu had already spoken about the importance of the soldier's morale in 400 BC, it was only after the desertions or the refusals to fight of the French Army, after the disastrous Nivelles offensive at the Chemin des Dames in 1917, that the military staff saw the importance of taking into account the amount of stress the troops could take without faltering. Still however, as the expression shell-shock confirms, mental stress was seen as being caused by the accumulation of too much exterior stress like bombardment, physical hardship of trench life, aso... The usefulness of brief therapy near the front line was discovered by people like Brown and Dillon (GB)<sup>4</sup>.

The British and US armies, mainly in WW II, with the help of organized psychological help, with people like Myers, Rogers, Foulkes, Bion, aso .. rediscovered the PIE (proximity, immediacy, expectancy) principles and that group discussion of the hardships suffered and their feelings about it helped.

This approach was then taken up by all modern armies and proved it's usefulness in WW II and Korea.

Alas dictatorial regimes like the 3rd Reich and the Soviet Empire used the old WWI approach and shot the "malingerer" or sent them to death in sacrificed battalions.

## **1.2. Internal Stress**

Especially in our peace missions, we are confronted mainly by what we call internal stress. Intensive combat, as external stressor, became rare but there is a continuous level of background stress. The accumulation of internal and external stress finally can cause severe problems to the mission, especially if it's a sensitive mission or a small one, where every person counts.

We can define the internal stress as the amount of tension the soldier brings along, in his head, from home to the mission, due to personal, family and relational problems. This is difficult to measure as on one side the individual, used to carrying all these impedimenta in his head might think them "normal" and believe this doesn't interfere with his/her functioning. On the other hand we see in the Western world that too much respect is given to privacy, and in Belgium the disappearance of live in quarters, will cause the staff to ignore many of the problems their team members might carry with them. The lack of padres doesn't help either. They are often the recipients of confidences about intimate suffering and they are respected middlemen between the staff. They discreetly bring to the attention of command the discontent that might be lurking and accumulating under the surface.

## **1.3. Personal/individual mental make-up and internal and external stress**

To complicate matters there is the extra tension that common and personal events bring, due to the particular build-up of the individual personality.

It's widely accepted that soldiers have different physical possibilities and that training and assignment has to take this into account. In practice however too little attention is still paid to the problem of the personal mental resistance. It's known that people, due to their particular genetics, life experience and sensitivities stress in different ways, at different times towards different stressors. However even higher command tends to have difficulties with that; General Patton's negative remarks towards the mental breakdown cases in the Sicily campaign of 1943 are well known.

The difficulty is that, while everybody knows what physical fatigue is, it's more difficult to imagine how somebody can faint if he/she sees blood, or, worse, a big spider, if he/she never felt the same. Physical experiences are more universal than the mental stress and thus easier to extrapolate from personal experience to those of fellow-soldiers. Mental experiences and reactions are more difficult to appreciate and to imagine, proofs are in all those books over the ages writing about how people feel, think, act and react, try Balzac and Dostoyevsky. But even if not obviously traumatized, individuals will often react in unpredictable ways, unless you know them well personally and are acquainted to their peculiar way of reacting to events.

## **II THE STRESS REACTION**

### **2.1. Introduction**

There is a fallacy which is often repeated in the military and in the business world, that a certain level of stress is good. This comes from the graph which shows that maximum arousal comes after some time of stress<sup>5</sup>. If indeed you can react physically better at the maximal arousal level we should not forget that this comes at a price. Indeed the stress reaction is a physical adaptation reaction to perceived challenges or threats. This had Darwinian survival value for primitive man who had to fight or flight in a dangerous nature, full of predators. However, when mankind developed weapons, we became the main worry and stressor of the predators. Then under actual life circumstances, where stress usually doesn't entail physical action, the stress reaction becomes an energy wasting process.

### **2.2. Stress is mainly an individual matter**

What make the stress reaction extra hard on the body is that it can start from anything perceived by the prefrontal brain regions as a threat. Alas evolution is lagging behind and the brain doesn't yet differentiate between physical and mental disturbances. This means that anything alerting you can trigger the body into activating stress reaction. This means that your commander saying something in a brusque way can upset your body as much as a barking dog jumping at you to bite you. Even worse this means that we can perceive threats where objectively nothing is happening around us. Man brings his personal history, prejudices, apprehensions, fears and imagination along to complicate the matter. This means that the stress reaction will not

only be different according to objective circumstances but it is due much more to subjective perception<sup>6</sup>. Imaginary threats, arising from the figments of one's imagination can start up the stress reaction and again our body is going to pay a price. Then we become our own worst enemy.

This complicates life in a military unit as people come in with different initial levels of stress, are sensitive to different kinds of stress and react differently. This goes against the dream of the unit as a well-ordered machine where every person is an efficient and predictable cog in the whole.

On international missions alien situations, by their unknown nature and their challenging nature, add to the basic level of stress with which you start the day on mission. Then the individual is nearer to his maximum level of stress with the threat of reacting brusquely.

### **2.3. Stress is cumulative**

Another and underestimated problem with stress is that it is cumulative<sup>7</sup>. If it only takes seconds to start up a physical stress reaction, reaching a peak after minutes, it will take hours to subside, after the alarm is over. Thus if before the body has finished clearing up after one alarm another alarm sets off the body chemistry and physiology, it will stay disturbed. After a long alarm phase it might take the body days or weeks to recover. Of course the longer and the more intense the activation of the body is, the worse we hamper and disturb its normal functioning and the higher the probability of final breakdown.

The problem of accumulation of stress is a difficult one for the military. Not only are there the normal individual, family, organization and hierarchy connected stresses but on mission, in an unforeseeable way, suddenly major stress can befall the individual, through ambush, fighting, maiming, and death around you.

An extra difficulty is that minor stressors are often not perceived as stressors by the surrounding people and sometimes not even by the person himself. However even minor stress takes time to subside, before the disturbances caused by the alert phase in the body calms down. The "critical mass" theory from physics is useful. It seems as if we all have different maximum levels of stress we can take in a limited amount of time, according to times and circumstances. As already mentioned people on missions already bring along, a fair amount of internal stress, then comes the external stress of having to take in and adapt to the alien circumstances of the deployment. Thus some people are already near maximum load before anything happens. When too many extra events, external ones from mission connected incidents or "internal" ones from home front problems add their

weight a stress overload can be reached. At a certain level of stress nearly everybody will crash. And as veterans know well, those that don't stress in stressful circumstances may be the most dangerous ones e.g idiots, psychopaths, psychotics ... Who can even endanger operations.

## **2.4. Stress is communicative**

As we know from the observation of closed systems the pressure cooker principle applies. This accumulation of tension and stress inside a small compound, where a large number of people are obliged to live together for months on end, is a hotbed for all kinds of rumours. Some of those rumours can get out of hand and conspiracy and doom theories can suddenly flood the unit. After an underground gestation period some bizarre theory can flare up and even lead to, an objectively unwarranted, panic, the nightmare of any command.

## **2.5. Stress and habituation**

In time we are able to habituate to some stressors. The habitual or the foreseeable ones are the easiest to discount after a time. Thus many tasks which are stressful at first become easier after repetition. This implies the need for training, training and re-training. The more often you are realistically ambushed, as an exercise, the less stressed you will be when the real thing happens. However man is not a machine, nor a rat in a maze.

# **III FOUR PITFALLS IN MILITARY THINKING ABOUT STRESS**

## **3.1. Selection instead of training**

There is a historical background to this. One of the most common pitfalls in military thinking is dreaming back to the easy conscription years. Then indeed military planners and leaders had the luxury of a continuous stream of young people with all kinds of personalities, characters and training. Then the main problem was how to select the best possible ones for the military and for special assignments. Now this conscription has stopped another way of seeing personal selection and training has to be developed.

Then, probably structurally, command dreams they can find, on the market the ready made soldier, with the right kind of mental make-up. Because it works for most other aspects of the army's functioning, they prefer schematized, generalized approaches. The administration favors rulebook guidance systems, which proved so useful in managing most processes. So they will ask the selecting staff to find those dream soldiers.

There is also the perpetual tendency to put too much emphasis on selection. Each new generation of young and enthusiastic psychologists, unhindered by practical field experiences, still seems to dream of the perfect tests which will unfailingly deliver the ideal soldier. This is based on the success of psychological tests for stable civilian jobs with simple job descriptions. However the armed forces need all kinds of people and personalities as it is an organization which has to be practically self-sufficient. Then there is the problem that military life, especially on mission, is unpredictable in what happens and about the stress this entails for the individual.

Finally what we tend to forget is that many men dream of a magical selection which will reveal the real soldiers, without the effort of having to learn and train systematically.

### **3.2. "Stress is good for you"**

As already discussed in the previous chapter about the effects of stress and the danger of cumulative stress, stress is not good for you. Adrenaline gives an uplifting, high feeling but that doesn't mean that efficiency increases. Sensory perception does better but at the price of limiting memory functions and cool rational thought. Our brain is like any computer: give it too many tasks to do at once and it slows down.

Then there are people, already stressed by previous life events, who carry with them too high a level of stress and search for stressful situation to feel normal. This means that they don't want to feel stressed when objectively nothing is happening around them, so they construct a stressful environment to be able to talk away this stress.

Lastly there is a small group of adrenaline addicts who for one reason or another think they need high excitation levels to feel alive. It can be people who have for too long lived under stress and / or psychopaths.

The "stress is good for you" approach is medically the wrong one. Life, especially on military mission, will already bring about enough stress, don't add to it.

### **3.3. The Rambo Syndrome**

Many people in the military, for instance, mainly our paratroopers and jet fighter pilots, who consider themselves to be elite troops, can't conceive themselves as being sensitive to the same emotional turmoil as mere mortals, they will not complain about stress and fear. Only in the secrecy of a visit to a private doctor, on the condition of his/her not sharing this information with their military counterparts, will they talk. Usually the more combat oriented the unit is the more the Rambo syndrome reigns. Rank doesn't seem to make much difference.

An extra problem is that many non commissioned – and petty officers who train our troops tend to forget what they were told at school and gain inspiration themselves from Hollywood military movies. Many soldiers, used to those kinds of movies, will go along with this kind of training, full of action and stress. They all tend to forget that we usually don't have to replay Iwo Jima on our international missions.

### **3.4. Some general morale boosters take the stress away**

Most of the staff members underestimate the complexity of the stress problem.

As already mentioned in the first chapter stress is firstly individual and cumulative. What stresses one person doesn't stress the other one, nor with the same intensity. What does not stress one person at one point in time, might later on, when the measure is full for that person, lead to catastrophic stress reactions. Sensitivity to stress and the amount of accumulated stress one starts with on mission is an individual affair, difficult to measure beforehand.

General morale boosters have their effect and their limitations due to those factors.

## **IV ANTI-STRESS MEASURES<sup>8,9</sup>**

### **4.1. General anti-stress measures**

- a. There is the general stress of being sent on mission in a foreign country with another climate and a different people with their own customs, diffidence and even hostility. Information sessions with extra literature to read afterwards and the possibility of meeting experts and questioning



them can help. Realistic training at home or in a friendly, look alike country helps to develop routines which will avoid the stress of culture shock.

- b. Specific stress related to an individual mission or to special circumstances. It's difficult to prepare the troops for this. Here is where the experience of the staff helps. The more experienced the command is the more chances there are of handling the situation without feeling harried and of transmitting the own equanimity to the troops.
- c. On mission instituting routines, common activities and diverse occupations helps. The military routines like rituals, parades, drill & exercises keep the unit aware of its military nature and give a sense of unity. Don't forget the "orphan" units like the medical platoon...
- d. As far as possible form tightly knit teams, where people know each other. The regional regiments were a good solution. Alas it seems they are too expensive now for our governments.

## 4.2. Specific anti stress measures

Here lies our new challenge. As we saw stress on peace missions is mainly an individual problem.

### a. Continuous selection based on stress detection.

It's more realistic to continuously asses and select people according to their actual stress state than to dream of a once and for all times selection at enlistment. As we saw stress is mainly an individual problem. If too many individuals however stress and panic stress becomes a unit problem. Alas we miss an individual stress dose meter like we have for radiation and people tend to lie, about their stress levels. Before the mission everybody wants to feel or at least seem "top gun". People also dream that the mission will solve problems they have in their personal life. Thus stress detection is a continuous problem for a unit.

It can be done on three levels:

- Buddy level: usually it's your friends and comrades who notice changes in your mood and behaviour first. They have to be trained to mention their observations to the hierarchy.
- NCOs and petty officers: Usually they know their troops and can easily spot deficiencies. It helps to explain to them what to look for: changes of mood and /or behaviour, and to get them to report their observations in time to their commanding officer.
- Command level. An experienced field officer usually picks up things fast. It helps if command organises formal "stress-briefings" and explains to

the staff the importance of mentioning, in time, deviation of mood or behaviour that they observe around them.

### **b. Continuous stress prevention**

The armed forces have the advantage of being well organised and structured organisations, free to decide about the use of time, having the spirit of camaraderie... These are all advantages one often misses in civil structures. This allows them to work preventively on the individual and on the unit level.

#### a. At unit level:

- Explaining what's happening, what can be expected and discussing the pros and cons of different approaches to the mission alleviates cognitively the fear of the unknown and of their dark fantasies about what could happen.
- The use of rituals: the armed forces, and often each regiment, have their own rituals like parades, feasts ... Rituals sooth the mind and underline the feeling of belonging.
- Keep mind and body occupied positively. Sometimes, due to the hostile environment, this can be a challenge. Think about activities like choral singing, theatricals, courses & lectures with discussions, ... It 's at empty moments that people start to brood and imagine stressful events. One should also feel the advantages of belonging to such a good group that does all those nice things.
- R & R: don't forget the old classics: enough sleep and recreation helps. Try to go for overlap in the proposed activities and the psychological promotion of camaraderie.

#### b. At the individual level:

- Train people in individual stress prevention. The most difficult of propositions but in the long term the most promising new approach is the systematic relaxation training of individuals. After learning to identify one's stress level different relaxation techniques are possible. The best known ones are sports, gymnastics, yoga, meditation ... Some of the samurai techniques like the Kyudo (bow shooting) and the Johannes Schultz autogenic training, a form of self hypnosis towards relaxation are also usable.

## Conclusion

We start the mission with people bringing along their internal, personal stress and their habitual ways of coping, more or less efficiently with it.

On mission we are in a stressful business, because of the sudden and unpredictable accumulation of external and internal stress.

Teach soldiers, non-commissioned and petty officers to recognize stress in themselves and those around them and to report dangerous stress levels to their command.

Teach the staff to keep as keen an eye on morale as on food and ammunition levels.

Teach personnel individual awareness of stress and how to develop ways of coping with this. Psychosomatisation can be one of the first alarm signals of too much stress accumulating in the unit.

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