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“BOOTS ON THE GROUND” RESILIENCE IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

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Service Paper

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By / Par le Major Stu Evans

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AIM

1. The selection and training of Canadian citizens in order to become soldiers in the CAF is a very expensive and lengthy process. There are many hurdles that must be accomplished by both the applicant and the institution in order to ensure that the applicant will be a good fit within the institution. The aim of this service paper is to identify options that the CAF could take in recruiting, selection and training in order to build resilience in its personnel prior to deployment to reduce the risk of PTSD.

INTRODUCTION

2. A very broad and lengthy topic, this paper will further refine options that should be considered at the beginning of the application and selection process. Addressing options primarily during the recruiting period. This paper will highlight that this is an ideal time to begin screening applicants for their baseline resiliency and natural habits, which contribute to their resilience. The recruiting period covered in this paper is that period in time when the civilian applicant has submitted the application to join the forces up until the time he/she receives an offer from the CAF.

3. Recruiting a new member into the CAF as stated, is a lengthy and difficult process. As described on the CAF recruiting website, involved are multiple steps that must be completed such as:

- a. Aptitude Testing – tests verbal skills, spatial ability and problem solving to help determine specific military occupations for which candidates are best suited;
- b. Medical Examination – ensures candidates are medically fit to a standard sufficient to complete basic training and be prepared for service with the CF;
- c. Enhanced Reliability Check – confirms reliability and trustworthiness in the performance of duties and in the protection of assets and interests of the CF and its personnel; and
- d. Personal Interview – basically a job interview that gives the recruiters a better idea about the candidate, his or her background, strengths, weaknesses and where the candidate would best fit in as a member of the CF.¹

4. As described above, there are many tasks that need to be completed in order to successfully complete the application process and deploy to St. Jean Quebec for Basic Training. While time consuming, these detailed steps are in place to ensure that only suitable candidates continue further in the selection process and deploy to St. Jean. This paper will explain that an additional step by screening for an applicant’s pre-existing level of resilience within the confines of either the personal interview process or the aptitude test may yield positive results and better refinement of potential applicants.

¹ Canada, Dept. of National Defence. *Joining the Canadian Forces: The Recruiting Process*. <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=joining-the-canadian-forces-the-recruiting-process/hnps1u03#archived>

DISCUSSION

5. While conducting the research for this service paper, it is clear that there is already a robust plan for resilience training once a member is in the CAF. After the member has completed Basic Training as well as their military occupational Individual Training, they are off to their units and there are programs and plans in place to give them training with respect to resilience. Examples of this type of training fall under both Canadian Army Integrated Performance Strategy (CAIPS) and the Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) program, “a comprehensive mental health training and education program designed to increase mental health literacy and enhance resilience and mental toughness, in order to ultimately improve short-term performance and long-term mental health outcomes.”² This training is given throughout a members career both pre and post-deployment and throughout their various career courses and postings across Canada. It is assessed that there is a gap or opportunity that could be leveraged with respect to resilience at the recruit selection portion. This would be an ideal time to get a baseline assessment of an applicant’s level of resilience and determine if they have the qualities that are helpful in creating and maintaining a positive resilient mindset capable of dealing with the many changes and stresses that come from a career in the military and reducing the risk of PTSD.

6. In recent years, the CAF has been recruiting and hiring from all walks of life. The CAF is looking to get a representative sample of the Canadian public to join and embrace the military lifestyle. While the yearly number of applicants who are interested and apply to the CAF is unknown, the average # of people that go on to pass the selection process and deploy to St. Jean is around 5000 (in 2016 and 2017 about 4,200 and 5,300, respectively)³. While admittedly this is a very large number of applicants for the Canadian Forces Recruiting Group (CFRG) to handle. There will be examples given of opportunities where screening for resilience can happen with minimal interruption. This is all with a view to minimize delays or slowdowns due to increased workload. It is assumed that no new members will be posted to the recruitment centres to assist with resiliency screening of applicants.

7. It is essential that potential applicants who apply to be members of the CAF understand that the job is unlike any other offered by the federal government. The CAF needs to ensure that its members are resilient and adaptable and interested in serving their country. In order to help explain why resilience screening is a necessary first step, it is useful to provide two definitions of resilience, first the dictionary and more importantly, as it relates to the profession of arms. Webster’s defines it as “the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress, or an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.”⁴ Within the CAIPS Op O 01, there is an exemplary definition of what resilience is and how it is applied to the military lifestyle. It is defined as “Resilience is the capacity of a soldier to adapt, resist, and thrive in the face of the stress imposed by Army life in garrison, training and operational environments. Resilience is not about coping with a singular

² LCol Suzanne Bailey, Hamid Boland, Kimberly Guest, Joshua A. Granek, Jerzy Jarmasz. *Mobile Applications for Personalized Mental Health Resiliency Training*. (DRDC Toronto 2017), 3.

³ Canada, Auditor General, *2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada Report 5—Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence*. 2016, 5.23.

⁴ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. *Definition of Resilience*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>.

event but rather adapting to the overall culture and lifestyle that accompanies Army life as an enduring profession.”⁵

8. The definitions of resilience above help to explain that there are qualities that can be looked for during the recruitment process to gain an understanding of an applicant’s capacity for resilience. Probing questions that ask or try to draw out examples of adaptability, and ability to thrive in a stressful environment. Also, questions about the person’s family and friend network to see if they have a support system. Based on Courtney Ackerman’s article on measuring resilience, “the key factors which contribute to highly resilient individuals, namely family support and cohesion, external support systems, and dispositional attitudes and behaviors.”⁶ Having a familial support system is one of the indicators that the individual may be more resilient and able to handle stresses that will be placed on a CAF soldier; a good support system is one of the ways to reduce the occurrence of PTSD. These stresses both mental and physical will be handled better by those persons who have a family support system to go along with the support they could expect to receive from membership within the brotherhood and sisterhood of the CAF. Many members go through difficult times and it is often their close friends or peers who are experiencing the same issues or have done so in the past that will be of great help. Within the CAF is a very strong social/ military culture that often gets overlooked but is a great source of pride and support to the members.

9. Opportunities where resiliency screening could be effective during the selection process would be either during the personal interview portion or the aptitude testing portion. It will really depend on the level of rigour given to the screening of applicants for resilience or their potential to be a resilient member of the CAF. Should it be determined that resilience screening will involve a form for the applicant to fill out, that could be done during the aptitude testing phase. If screening is to involve verbal questions, then it should be conducted during the personal interview.

10. During the personal interview, there is already questioning being done where candidates are asked questions such as: tell me about your background; education; how you will be an asset to the organization; why do you want to join. While clearly not the exhaustive list of questions that an applicant would receive, these lines of questions give the interviewer an idea of the applicant’s personal qualities, education and desire to be a member of the CAF. Have they always dreamed of being a member or is it just a job? These questions get at the motivation of the applicant to join, but they do not cover or cover deeply enough, whether this applicant is a resilient person capable of handling the stress that comes with employment in the CAF.

11. There are different types of questions that should also be asked in order to get an assessment of an applicant’s resilience. Some generic questions below drawn from Charles Trivett who works and writes for Coburg Banks, a recruitment agency in the U.K.:

1. Describe the last time you got really stressed at work.

⁵ Canada, Dept. of National Defence, (4500-1 Canadian Army Integrated Performance Strategy (CAIPS) Op O 01. 2015), 1.

⁶ Courtney Ackerman. *How To Measure Resilience: 8 Resilience Scales For Youth & Adults*. (Positive Psychology Program. 2017), 1.

2. Describe a time when someone else put pressure on you.
3. What has been your greatest failure?
4. What's your biggest pet peeve at work?
5. How do you ensure your team doesn't get overwhelmed?⁷

The questions would need refinement to apply to the CAF but are useful as examples. These questions demonstrate that it is possible to get an appreciation of an interviewee's level of resilience. Changing or adjustment the bank of questions that are currently used by our members in the recruiting centres would result in a better understanding or appreciation of the applicant's resilience. These new questions when applied with the other types of questions currently being asked, will give the interviewer a better or more comprehensive idea of the suitability of the applicant for military life and the rigours involved. A key task that cannot be allowed to fail in resiliency screening is the reduction in the occurrence of PTSD for our members. The questions need to be scrutinized and relevant, taking the considerations of PTSD reduction into account.

12. The CAF aptitude testing is another opportunity during the recruit selection process to determine whether an applicant possesses the qualities commonly found in resilient people. These qualities drawn from McGarry, Mythen, and Walklate's article are "defined as an interplay of "intrapersonal factors" (personality traits, e.g., hardiness, optimism, and self-esteem) and "interpersonal factors" (supportive environments that facilitate resilience, e.g., social support) that fosters resilience and reduces PTSD."⁸ While not immediately obvious, this information could be gleaned from the applicant with the use of a questionnaire. Multiple questions would be created and written covering both interpersonal and intrapersonal factors so that the applicant can demonstrate their level of resilience and if they possess the qualities of resilient people on the questionnaire. During aptitude testing, the applicant is required to complete the aptitude tasks on a computer; the resilience questionnaire could be given before or after the aptitude test and analyzed at the same time as the scoring for the aptitude test.

13. A counter to the idea of adding resilience screening to the CFRG selection process may be that some in key positions may think this type of screening could go against the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. That is not the case when considering DAOD 5023-0, Universality of Service. "This principle holds that CAF members are liable to perform general military duties and common defense and security duties. This may include, but is not limited to, the requirement to be physically fit, employable and deployable for general operational duties."⁹ Universality of Service sets forth expectations both physical and mental that the CAF soldier must be able to meet and/or exceed. It is clear that with the placement of Universality of Service within our DAOD's, it is not a stretch to make the assessment that screening of applicants to determine their level of resilience is indeed possible.

⁷ Charles Trivett. *5 Interview Questions to Assess Resilience*. (Assessing Applicants 2016), 1.

⁸ Ross McGarry, Gabe Mythen, and Sandra Walklate. *A Sociological Analysis of Military Resilience: Opening Up the Debate*. (Armed Forces & Society 2015, Vol 41(2) 2015), 356.

⁹ Canada, Dept. of National Defence, *DAOD 5023-0, Universality of Service*,

14. In the publication, *Strong Secure and Engaged*, the need to have resilient armed forces capable of multiple deployments throughout the globe was expressed. “The rise of borderless challenges such as terrorism and cyber-attacks, the increasingly strong connection between global stability, domestic security and prosperity, and the fact that the CAF is as likely to support broader whole-of-government efforts abroad as it is at home.”¹⁰ This is an indication of the types of missions that our members will find themselves deploying to support. Throughout the publication, deployments and the ability to deploy is stressed and emphasized. It is understood that a member’s resilience and their ability to handle the stresses of a rapidly changing current events coupled with home and family complications will be essential to their having a successful and fulfilling career. Resiliency screening and training will be key factors in reducing the incidence of PTSD.

CONCLUSION

15. While the future of the CAF is in flux and will change very rapidly, the members need to be able to embrace this rapid change and flourish in an unclear or fluidly changing environment. From deploying on operations overseas to providing support to Canada at the domestic level, the members of the CAF must be able to rapidly switch gears and react accordingly. It is clear from our senior leaders and the publication, *Strong Secure and Engaged*, that deployments and supporting domestic operations will be an ongoing planning consideration. The mental resilience of our soldiers will be challenged. Often, people do not “rise to the occasion,” often they sink to their level of training. It is worth considering that concept when considering resilience. Some members of the CAF when faced with stressful or unbearable situations may not “rise to the occasion” but may fall back on their level of resiliency to handle these stressful situations. It would be remarkable, if resiliency screening existed which helped to demonstrate a member’s resiliency and their ability to create a resilient lifestyle while flourishing in a demanding occupation such as the CAF.

RECOMMENDATION

16. The CAF is currently conducting resilience training for its members during their basic training and this training continues throughout their careers. The CAF must begin to consider screening applicants for their levels of resiliency or potential to live a resilient lifestyle prior to enrollment or offer of employment within the CAF. It will take time to craft the correct questions and to determine which methods are best for screening. Deciding whether to use the personal interview step or the aptitude test step in the selection process will require further study. This screening can be done during the already well-established recruiting process with a minimum of impact on the members working in the recruiting centres but will require buy-in and support from the CFRG.

¹⁰ Canada, Dept. of National Defence, *Strong Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. Cdn Electronic Library, 2017, 81.

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