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CHALLENGES IN AIR EXPEDITIONARY OPERATIONS: THE NEED FOR GREATER RESILIENCY IN PERSONNEL

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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CHALLENGES IN AIR EXPEDITIONARY OPERATIONS: THE NEED FOR GREATER RESILIENCY IN PERSONNEL

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, a trend is emerging in the population at large (civilian and military) of powerlessness in managing stress, solving modest challenges, or handling compromises of one's emotional or personal situation. This apparent issue of being incapable of coping is having operational impacts in the military and personnel on air expeditionary operations are not immune. This observation on coping issues seems to stem from deficiencies in mental/emotional resilience,¹ challenges with the family back home, being unable to rationalise what is urgent and what is less urgent, and being able to directly deal with matters.

The conduct of air expeditionary operations has evolved with the stand up of 2 Wing in 2013. Whether fighter aircraft, strategic or tactical airlift, or helicopters are deploying, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) will often dispatch units from 2 Wing, its sole vanguard formation, first. The benefits of having such a formation with unique capacities to establish an airfield "from scratch" (if need be) and enable operations to commence upon aircraft arrival is critical to mission success. The RCAF's role has evolved and --- whether speaking of flood or forest fire relief in Canada, humanitarian aid in an earthquake or hurricane ravaged area, air policing missions, etc. --- an air expeditionary capability is essential for Canada to realize effects as soon as possible. 2 Wing's personnel enable these effects.

The Wing does not consist of traditional flying squadrons per se but, rather, it has units which encompass groupings of personnel across various areas of specialty so that air power

¹ The Mayo Clinic states that "Resilience means being able to adapt to life's misfortunes and setbacks." Mayo Clinic website, "Resilience: Build skills to endure hardship," accessed 24 May 2018, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311>.

projection can be realized via the introduction of an adjustable and scalable, task-tailored inject of assets. The Wing has experienced steady growth with the receipt of funding, and equipment since its inception. The outstanding pending request for a “high tempo unit”² (HTU) designation will see specific new members of 2 Wing undergo a screening process before joining its ranks. In the interim, with its current cohort of members posted to the formation for an unspecified number of years, 2 Wing has met every challenge placed in its path to date through motivation, energy, pride and drive. These qualities can only take these repeatedly deploying warriors so far given the emergence of signs of stress and resiliency compromise.

This paper argues that, with the operational tempo faced and the nature of the work performed, 2 Wing requires the fittest and most resilient personnel available. The paper presents the stressors for personnel deployed on air expeditionary operations, how resiliency can mitigate deployment stressors and thereby permit the successful realization of air effects. The costs and impacts of having a compromised or diminished resiliency capacity across its ranks will be employed to explain the limitations that influence 2 Wing. An examination of efforts being made to develop solutions to sources of resiliency compromises follows. Such an examination makes clear that 2 Wing requires an HTU designation coupled with personnel possessing the mental/emotional resilience to effectively achieve mission success and the means to more quickly identify surfacing challenges.

² A high tempo unit is defined as, “A unit that is regularly tasked for short-term deployments of 1 to 60 days, primarily to special duty areas or special duty operations.” Source: Department of National Defence. “DAOD 5009-1 Personnel Readiness Verification Screening.” 24 April 2017.

BACKGROUND

Nature of 2 Wing Work

As the RCAF's exclusive air expeditionary formation, 2 Wing maintains a posture that enables select elements to deploy on 12 hours' notice to move and enable air power wherever needed, nationally or around the world. Following the initial deployment of lead elements, larger groups of the formation deploy wherever Canada needs air effects within seven days. The air expeditionary wing can enable air operations from an established location or an austere one in a variety of environments, conditions, or constructs.³ In most cases, the first of its deploying members establish communications reach-back to Canada, fulfil a coordination role within an operations centre or larger task force, install an air traffic control capacity, etc. As the vanguard, 2 Wing often must be self-sufficient for the initial period in theatre and be expected to achieve great amounts in very compressed and specific timeframes.

The consequences of failing to establish the airfield on time with the required capabilities and services is a delay in the start of flying operations. In instances of humanitarian relief, this represents real potential for loss of life and/or the prolonging of unnecessary suffering. The long hours and demanding conditions of performing such tasks place great stresses on 2 Wing members as they endeavour to satisfy the myriad demands placed upon them. Absences from the garrison location and family can range from several weeks to several months or more depending on the mission in question and have potential to lead to special challenges as the time away accumulates.

³ Examples include Philippines post-typhoon relief (2013), Romania and Lithuania air policing (2014), Operation *Impact* airfield activation in Kuwait (2014), Nepal post-earthquake relief (2015), Lebanon and Jordan air bridge for Canadian citizens (2015), Romania air policing (2017), support to flood and forest fire mitigation efforts in Canada for Operation *Lentus* (2016 and 2017), and support to the G7 hosted in Canada (2018).

Operational Tempo

2 Wing must be ready to respond to at least two types of “lines of operation” at all times: a major deliberate operation of possible unknown duration; and a contingency surge operation of expected short duration in response to crises.⁴ Such a posture obliges select members to deploy frequently; with communications and information systems personnel, logistical, and construction engineering trades deploying more often than others. Extra-frequent deployments for some personnel coupled with minimal time to recover, return to normalcy, reconnect with the family before the next deployment takes a physical and emotional toll on the deployed member and, if applicable, his/her family. Presently, 2 Wing’s high level of operational tempo and on-going preparations for summer 2018 will result in a skeletal garrison due to the majority of personnel being on three consecutive and, for some members, overlapping operations, deployments, and/or exercises.

A key human dimension in the issue of operational tempo is deployment fitness of individual members. While aircraft squadrons cycle through a managed readiness posture where they are liable to satisfy aircraft, aircrew, and technician obligations per a published rotational schedule, 2 Wing’s finite number of personnel must operate differently. They are called upon to deploy time after time with varying degrees of notice and with undefined amounts of time to reconstitute and prepare for the next deployment. The obligation to be ready to deploy with minimal notice places the additional stressor of the unknown on individuals as it is often unclear precisely when certain deployments will occur. Domestic operations in response to spring flooding in Quebec and Ontario as well as summer forest fires are two sets of prime examples. 2 Wing, like most Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) formations, does not have 100% of its

⁴ Department of National Defence, RCAF, *Air Force Expeditionary Capability Concept of Operations*, 2 December 2011, page 1.

established positions filled and must also contend with a portion of its personnel having various temporary or permanent restrictions to deploying. These factors further place the burden of deployments on those who are able to deploy.

HTU Designation

In recognition of the challenges 2 Wing must face in managing a cadre of personnel who are continuously ready to deploy, it has submitted a request to RCAF leadership for an HTU designation. If granted, such a designation would require enhanced verification screening to confirm deployment fitness of personnel considered for a transfer to the formation.⁵ The request remains under review but, it is hoped that the extra stringent screening prior to transfer may yield a greater pool of personnel fit for the dynamic tasks performed by the formation. There are two potential unintentional consequences of the HTU designation; it could limit the number of personnel transferred to units if suitably fit ones cannot be found⁶ and personnel are only posted to such units for a maximum of three years.

STRESSES OF MILITARY OPERATIONS

Stressors at 2 Wing

The physical and psychological demands of military operations expose personnel

⁵ Department of National Defence. "DAOD 5009-1 Personnel Readiness Verification Screening." 24 April 2017.

⁶ Threaded discussion exchange - JCSP 43 DL Course 554, Case Study Part 2 - Core Issues and Tensions, Maj Jason Neufeld / Maj Richard Tremblay, 19 April 2018.

to stressors and experiences which may lead to mental illnesses or other suffering.⁷ In the type of operations in which 2 Wing has thus far found itself, its members have been able to enjoy frequent telecommunication and/or social network exchanges with family members back home. This represents a double-edged sword which permits the important connectivity required for the emotional well-being of both parties but, it also potentially introduces issues concerning feelings of loneliness⁸ by family members and regarding challenges with matters on the “home front”⁹ to become stressors --- or perhaps, worse, a distraction --- for the deployed military member. Derived from extensive research by renowned military research psychologist, Paul T. Bartone --- and as influenced by others to acknowledge the frequency and pace of deployments --- six primary psychological stress dimensions in modern military operations have been identified: isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, danger, and workload.¹⁰ This paper concentrates on the dimension of workload for 2 Wing as supported by the arguments that overstretching its personnel can lead to operational stress injuries (OSI) and that inadequate numbers of personnel can lead to burn out and stress which have a real potential to impair ability to fulfill mission requirements.

Symptoms of Stress

The “Patient Care & Health Info” portal of the Mayo Clinic’s website lists the

⁷ Col Randy Boddam, “Canadian Forces Approach to the Identification and Management of Operational Stress Injuries.” *Novel Approaches to the Diagnosis and Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, IOS Press, 2006, 111.

⁸ COL Derrick Arincorayan, Larry Applewhite, and Rene Robichaux. “Family Advocacy: A Program to Support an Expeditionary Army.” *The Army Medical Department Journal*, July – September 2010, 37.

⁹ MAJ Thomas Jarrett, “Warrior Resilience Training in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Combining Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, Resiliency, and Positive Psychology.” *The Army Medical Department Journal*, July – September 2008, 37.

¹⁰ Paul T. Bartone, “Resilience Under Military Operational Stress: Can Leaders Influence Hardiness?” *Military Psychology*, 18, 2006, 133-134.

common effects of stress on one's mood as: anxiety; restlessness; lack of motivation or focus; feeling overwhelmed; irritability or anger; and sadness or depression.¹¹ 2 Wing's experiences during the myriad of various and frequent deployments likely has resulted in these effects being displayed by a portion of the formation's personnel. When the relative limited number of years' service of 2 Wing's newest personnel --- a young generation seeing its first deployment(s) while with the formation --- is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that some of these personnel may lack the experience to cope with demands placed on them.

Stresses in the Family

Returning to the previous point of frequent exchanges with family, it is argued that deployed personnel learning of stressors at home have the real potential to become distracted by this information or even impacted directly by it if they adopt or take ownership of the issue. Unlike in the past --- before affordable cellular phone data plans --- where information may have had to be communicated via the postal service or simply held for the return of the deployed member, the near real-time transmission of news and updates blurs the lines between home and the theatre of operations. This has the potential to see 2 Wing personnel being keenly aware of such stressors for the family as: being far away from family; finances; inconsistent work schedule; time away; not knowing/out of the loop; lack of intimacy; constant transition; children's behaviour; and physical illness/injury.¹²

¹¹ Mayo Clinic website, "Stress symptoms: Effects on your body and behavior," accessed 15 May 2018, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>.

¹² Jennifer Woodworth, 2015. "Military Family Stressors Can Impact Physical & Mental Health." EP Magazine, August 2015, 54-55.

RESILIENCY AND CAPABILITY

Importance of Resiliency

Extensive review of existing literature on the subject by a team of researchers for Defence Research and Development Canada on psychological resiliency concluded there is a lack of a uniform definition of resiliency.¹³ Accepting that there is little return on investment to employ a specific definition of resiliency in a paper of this length, the author borrows the following from Canadian research on the subject to underscore the importance of the concept of resiliency: *Because stress is a major component of military life, military personnel are required to be psychologically resilient; thus, knowing the psychological characteristics that predict resilience is vital for military organizations.*¹⁴ An extension on the above is that both medical and institutional arguments exist for military personnel to have resilience. The medical reasons can be supported from the perspective that a healthy member is a productive and effective element of a larger group requiring no resources to keep it performing. The institutional reasons for valuing resiliency can be that the healthy member requires no care post-release from the military; that the member's self-discipline can foster emulation by peers and subordinates; and that resilient members can achieve larger scale, team-based objectives more efficiently.

Resiliency Challenges

As advanced in the introduction to this paper, some military personnel, including

¹³ J Wald, S Taylor, GJG Asmundson, KL Jang, J Stapleton. 2006. "Literature Review of Concepts: Psychological Resiliency." Contract Report W7711-057959/A. Toronto, ON, Canada, Defence Research and Development Canada, accessed 12 May 2018, www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a472961.pdf, 7.

¹⁴ Alia Skomorovsky and Sonya Stevens. "Testing a Resilience Model Among Canadian Forces Recruits." *Military Medicine*. Vol. 178, August 2016, 829.

those in air expeditionary operations,¹⁵ seem to have coping issues stemming from deficiencies in resilience. This position applies to 2 Wing given the tempo and long hours experienced by its personnel with the following observations having been made by the author and affirmed by various leadership members: distractions to mission accomplishment due to issues at home; inability to effectively work extended hours for long stretches of time; occasional engagement in petty disputes over matters of insignificant import; isolated cases of poor judgement; etc. Resiliency and hardiness are critical to success both in theatre and in the long term as the demands of operational tempo take their toll on those with sub-optimal tools to persevere and succeed.

Hardiness

The myriad of references for this paper support that hardiness contributes to resilience and resiliency. Furthermore, as it is learned rather than inborn,¹⁶ this author posits that personnel of 2 Wing can develop hardiness and thereby become more effective at coping with the challenges associated with air expeditionary operations. According to Bartone et al, *hardiness is a generalized style of functioning that includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral features, and characterizes people who stay healthy under stress in contrast to those who develop stress-related problems.*¹⁷ Given the stressful and challenging nature of 2 Wing's activities when deployed, having hardiness in its personnel is a critical component if achieving mission success

¹⁵ It is worthy to note that, in addition to 2 Wing, two units at 8 Wing Trenton --- 429 Squadron (strategic airlift) and 436 Squadron (tactical airlift) --- operate upwards of 210 days/year and therefore face similar work and tempo challenges.

¹⁶ Jennifer E.C. Lee, Donald R. McCreary, and LCol Martin Villeneuve. "Prospective Multifactorial Analysis of Canadian Forces Basic Training Attrition." *Military Medicine*, Volume 176, July 2011, 782.

¹⁷ Bartone, Paul T., Dennis R. Kelly, and Michael D. Matthews. "Psychological Hardiness Predicts Adaptability in Military Leaders: A prospective study." *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, Volume 21, Number 2, June 2013, 202.

as well as the previously identified merits of the medical and institutional arguments for resilience.

The existence, promotion, and mimicking of hardiness will greatly contribute to the institutional reasons for resiliency and, by extension, will have positive impacts on capability and the maintenance of effectiveness. 2 Wing and, for that matter, all formations and units involved in air expeditionary operations would accordingly have great interest in its personnel learning to become hardy or hardier so that they might cope with the demands of single deployments as well as the effects of cumulative deployments, especially if minimal time is spent in garrison between periods spent away from it.

SOLUTIONS AND THE FUTURE

Screening Mechanisms

2 Wing is seen as the “go to” group when the RCAF needs to establish operations of this country’s air assets in a new location. When this formation’s members are screened to determine fitness to deploy or not, they are subjected to the identical method as anyone else in the CAF; a binary “deployable” or “non-deployable” assessment is made based on what the member shares with the social work or mental health professional. There are no different or additional questions that might uncover issues that a 2 Wing member might have --- that they may or may not be aware of --- and that might see them earn a “non-deployable” assessment as they prepare to embark on their nth consecutive deployment in a compressed period of time. Furthermore, given financial incentives such as a tax relief for deploying on certain international operations, some

individuals could feel inclinations to be less than forthcoming with reasons why they should not self-identify as having issues to make them non-deployable.

At present, it is standard operating procedure for the Canadian Forces Health Services Group and the various command headquarters to monitor the time that members spend away from their home formulations/units and their families. However, there is no data capturing that speaks to the frequency and intensity of the deployments nor of the nature of the work. Stated another way, time spent away from home for a course at a military institution in Borden, Ontario is seen as the same as five months on a coalition mission with high intensity air operations. Not all operations have the effect of creating or leading to OSIs amongst its participants but, the institution needs to recognize that the potential for such injuries is greater in certain operations or, for some personnel, if and when the operation is one of a number in close succession. Additionally, means for more effectively verifying the family's health for an impending deployment need to be developed to ensure the well-being of both the member and the family.

Millennials

The newest members of the CAF and 2 Wing are those of the Millennial generation. A large proportion of this group exploits the digital domain to its fullest advantage and the latter is central to how the generation is entertained, communicates, socializes, and gathers information.¹⁸ This connects to the earlier point of potential "home front" stressors on operations given the connectivity with the family which may be near instant and, accordingly, may feature prominently in how quickly a problem grows or is solved. Equally important to the

¹⁸ Alan Okros. "Slide to Unlock: Implications from the Harnessing 21st Century Competencies Project." *Report Submitted to DGMRA* (August 2015), 10.

issue of Millennials, information exchange, and the addressing of issues of stressors and OSI is how that generation and its views will figure into the near term and future conduct of operations given their philosophy that arguably demands a greater work / life balance.¹⁹ Although they are currently amongst the CAF's most junior members, Millennials and their use of the digital domain will influence how this group and the next one learns to deal with the aforementioned lack of experience to cope with stress. In recognition of this need, the United States Army has introduced *Spartan Plus Wi-Fi* for operations in locations like Romania and Bulgaria to give service members the means to remain connected with family and take care of business.²⁰

Prevention

Cultivating resilience and ensuring 2 Wing has personnel "fit" to perform the demands placed on them is critical to mission success. Solutions to achieve this end-state will need to consider the coping mechanisms required by personnel, whether they are on the first deployment or their tenth. Prevention can borrow from the work of Canadian researchers Stéphane Bouchard et al in the area of virtual environments to practice stress management skills²¹ or possibly include seeing a mental health specialist deployed with the formation in instances over a specific duration. Failure to prevent the negative effects of compromises to resilience and focus on the needs of the operation cannot be permitted to occur.

¹⁹ Ibid., 8.

²⁰ David Vergun, Army News Service, "Soldiers find mix of austerity, comfort in eastern Europe," accessed 24 May 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/194388/soldiers_find_mix_of_austerity_comfort_in_eastern_europe.

²¹ Stéphane Bouchard, O. Baus, F. Bernier, and D.R. McCreary, 2010. "Selection of Key Stressors to Develop Virtual Environments for Practicing Stress Management Skills with Military Personnel Prior to Deployment." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. Volume 13, Number 1, 2010. DOI: 10.1089=cyber.2009.0336.

CONCLUSION

2 Wing is a crucial, high in demand, RCAF formation with an operational tempo that is taxing its most important resource, its personnel. Designation as an HTU will aid in its ability to foster enduring mission success. Equally critical to success, the matter of resiliency will require close and constant attention and adaptation. As the Millennial cohort continue to fill the ranks of this formation, means to find compromise between the competing extremes of work / life balance and mission completion will place greater emphasis on the need for resiliency and hardiness. Success in this area will empower 2 Wing to continue in its delivery of vanguard focused activities for the RCAF and enable Canada to realize the effects it requires.

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