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EXERCISE/EXERCICE NEW HORIZONS

OPERATIONAL STRESS INJURIES: A PITFALL IN THE THREE-BLOCK WAR?

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ABSTRACT

Operational Stress Injuries are an unavoidable effect of military service and combat operations. It is accepted that all human beings have a variance in their level of tolerance to stress, but everyone has a breaking point. Operational Stress Injuries are a normal and expected result of the profession of arms and as such their causes, symptoms and treatment options should be well known. There should be no stigma associated, as they are not resultant from mental disorders or any form of weakness. The complexity of the future operating environment metaphorically labelled The Three Block War will be characteristic of increased stressors that could lead to a greater prevalence in Operational Stress Injuries. The complexity of the environment and the increased impact of leadership at all levels mandates that Operational Stress Injuries be recognisable and treatment readily available to ensure the health and effectiveness of our institution. This is a critical leadership responsibility.

“Our most important resource in the CF is our people.”¹

INTRODUCTION

Webster’s Dictionary defines stress as “...physical, mental or emotional strain.”² The United States Army Manual on Combat Stress, defines its subject in the following manner: “Combat Stress is the mental, emotional or physical tension, strain, or distress resulting from exposure to combat and combat-related conditions.”³

The Canadian Forces (CF) has adopted the term “operational stress” as utilised by Dr. Allan English.⁴ “...[N]o distinction is made between combat-induced stress and other forms of operational stress, based on the evidence that stress has an impact on humans whether caused by exposure to combat or any other type of stressful operational incident.”⁵

For the purpose of this paper the term “operational stress” as utilised in the CF will be employed as previously detailed and is inclusive of combat stress. The

¹ Chief of Defence Staff Guidance to Commanding Officer’s, 12.

² Webster’s, English Language Desk Reference Dictionary, Second Edition (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999).

³ United States. Department of Defense, Headquarters, Department of the Army. FM 6-22.5 *Combat Stress* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), preface.

⁴ Dr English teaches in the War Studies programme at The Royal Military College and was an advisor to the Board of Inquiry-Croatia on issues of combat stress reaction. He has authored numerous articles on the subject including *Leadership and Operational Stress in the Canadian Forces* published in the Canadian Military Journal, Autumn 2000.

⁵ Dr Allan English, “Leadership and Operational Stress in the Canadian Forces.” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol 1, No. 3 (Autumn 2000), 33.

phenomena of operational stress is not new and has likely existed for as long as man has engaged in hostile action against a foe.

In *On War*, the noted nineteenth century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz made reference to operational stress under his label of the “friction” in war. “Countless minor incidents-the kind you can never really foresee-combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls short of the intended goal, but of course it wears down the machine as well.”⁶

In the twentieth century operational stress has become more widely studied as a result of mankind’s continued propensity for large-scale conflict coupled with increased scientific knowledge and curiosity. During the First World War (WW I) stress casualties were widespread and seen in large numbers. Initially, there was a lack of understanding and a structured approach toward acknowledging the condition and its causes, a fact that has led to the stigma that must still be overcome to this day.⁷ However, towards the end of WW I much progress had been made to develop a comprehensive system that led to a reduction in preventable operational stress casualties.⁸ This progress is attributed to improved leadership who received advice from researchers, behavioural scientists and

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 119.

⁷ English, “Leadership ...”, 34. Stress related casualties in WW I were often “labelled as hysteria, shell shock, neurosis or lack of moral fibre.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

medical professionals. By 1918 treatment had progressed to that which is widely accepted today, “emphasising the principles of immediacy, proximity and expectancy.”⁹

Following WW I the military failed to retain the lessons of their experience and regressed in the understanding of operational stress. By the latter stages of World War Two (WW II) the military had returned to the proven treatments that had been developed during WW I.¹⁰ Similarly, the Israeli experiences in the 1973 Yom Kippur War reinforced the Allied experience with operational stress from WW II and the proven methods of treatment.¹¹

In Western civilization the phenomena of operational stress and its myriad of symptoms and effects became commonplace in our vernacular as a result of the American involvement in the Vietnam War and the significant numbers of veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Widespread in Western media and entertainment mediums, it would be difficult to not be familiar with the acronym. It has become synonymous and often misused in identifying the effects of traumatic event exposure in all facets of civilian life, and in particular with emergency responders.

Since the end of the Cold War, western militaries, including Canada, have participated extensively in what has become known as Operations Other Than War

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

(OOTW).¹² As noted in Dr English's article *Leadership and Operational Stress in the Canadian Forces*, operations "...such as peacekeeping or peace making, may be more stressful than combat in war."¹³

Since Dr English's article was published in 2000 the global security environment has undergone a transition following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The CF, like most western militaries, has become heavily engaged in a type of operations that some have described as "The Three Block War".¹⁴

THESIS

The thesis of this paper is that as Canada, and similarly other Western militaries, has subscribed to a view of future operations that will be increasingly complex, this reality will be resultant in an increased occurrence of Operational Stress Injuries (OSI). This will place additional importance on the role of leadership in the CF as this phenomenon will produce increased stressors on our institution that could have long-term ramifications.

¹² Department of National Defence, B-GG-005-004/AF-000 *Canadian Forces Operations* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2000), 1-3. OOTW is defined as "Activities during peacetime and conflict other than war."

¹³ English, "*Leadership ...*", 35.

¹⁴ The 'Three Block War' is a metaphor for the complex operating environment of the future and will be explored in the latter portion of this paper.

OUTLINE

This paper will be organized into four main areas. First will be an examination of combat stress injuries, their causes, symptoms and effects. Secondly will be an exploration of the concept of the Three Block War. What this term means in the original American context and in the morphed Canadian context, highlighting the complexities of these types of operations. Thirdly will be an analysis of the complexity of the Three Block War relative to its relationship to increased operational stress, the potential impact on the CF and the increased importance of leadership in the potential cause and mitigation of OSI. Last, before concluding, will be an overview of the current Canadian initiatives to deal with OSI.

OPERATIONAL STRESS

Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management is the latest compendium of articles in a series on Psychosocial Stress. The articles are by noted researchers and professionals and the Editors, Charles R. Figley and William P. Nash have participated in, and witnessed extensive combat ranging from the Vietnam War to current operations in Iraq.¹⁵

Exposure to stress can lead to both mental and emotional wounds that may be resultant in long-term disabilities. Like physical injuries, stress injuries can heal over

¹⁵ Charles R. Figley and William P. Nash eds, *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research and Management* (New York: Routledge, 2007), ix.

time. However, healing can be expedited with recognition of the symptoms and with the proper and immediate care. In the military context, mission success requires a balance with maintenance of personnel unless your force is so vast that an attritionist approach is feasible. Increasingly, leadership must be cognitive of the importance of stress management in the care and maintenance of our subordinates and ourselves.¹⁶

Within the military community there has traditionally existed a cultural outlook and sensitivities that are resultant in a different view of operational stress. Terminology such as battle exhaustion, combat fatigue or PTSD that have been previously utilized have wrongly labelled those suffering from operational stress with terminology normally associated with mental illness.¹⁷ This can have severe and lasting effects in a military culture where effectiveness and ability are often related to strength, both through physical and mental robustness. The use of the term operational stress is “non-judgemental” in its description of the challenge.¹⁸

William P. Nash suggests there are four approaches to examining combat stress: as a weapon, as ‘friction’ to be overcome, as a leadership challenge and as a test of personal confidence.¹⁹ Western militaries recognize the importance of stress and

¹⁶ Department of National Defence, *Chief of Defence Staff Guidance to Commanding Officers 2007*. Available from http://198.231.68.13/Admin/Canforgen/2007/CDSguideCO_e.pdf; Internet, accessed 23 February 2007, 43.– “I expect you to be competent in stress symptom recognition, assessing the need for, and the application of, stress management procedures and the timely utilization of support personnel.”

¹⁷ English, “*Leadership ...*”, 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ Figley and Nash, *Combat Stress Injuries...*, 13.

doctrinally strive to impart stressors on adversaries whilst protecting our own troops. The ‘friction’ caused by operational stress is an accepted fact of military service. The average citizen will not be exposed to the same levels of stress that military personnel willingly place themselves in serving in the context of unlimited liability.²⁰ The risks associated with operational stress are not new. In 1985 The U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies noted, “combat stress will be one of the most significant causes to loss of manpower.”²¹

The stressors that exist in modern militaries are numerous and varied in comparison to civilian life. An individual appreciation of these stressors is first step in coping and developing a personal stress reduction philosophy.²² Particularly in a small military organization such as the CF where medical care is often outsourced, the professionals offering treatment must comprehend the unique characteristics of military service and culture. As previously discussed, cultural beliefs within the CF may often compound challenges to self-acknowledgement of a stress related problem.

No serving member is immune to operational stress and everyone has a limit of tolerance to stress. Incapacitating stress injuries can be resultant from a single event or

²⁰ Department of National Defence, B-GL-300-000/FP-000 *Canada's Army, We Stand on Guard for Thee* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 1998), 33. “Canadian Forces’ members are obliged to carry out duties and tasks without regard to fear or danger, and ultimately, to be willing to risk their lives if the situation requires.”

²¹ James E. Driskell and Eduardo Salas eds. *Stress and Human Performance* (Mahwah New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996), 90.

²² Department of National Defence, Directorate of Preventative Medicine, Surgeon General Branch. CFPA-MD 007-114 JD-001 1988 *Stress and You* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 1988). Although a cartoon-like pamphlet it was an early effort to educate the CF about stress management.

persistence can lead to breaking point based on cumulative stress over a period of time.²³

William P. Nash asserts that modern stressors can be categorized in five groups: physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual.²⁴

Physical stressors are often sensory (environmentally based) or physiological. Environmentally they may include temperature and temperature variance, smell and odours, noise levels, light levels, moisture levels (damp or dryness) and dirt or mud exposure. Physiologically stressors are effects such as sleep deprivation, malnutrition and injury or illness.

Cognitive stressors may include: a lack of or too much information, an ambiguous or constantly changing mission and its associated rules of engagement, boredom or monotony, the surrealism of experiences and, lastly, loyalty conflicts that may arise between ones comrades and family at home.

Emotional stressors may be situational and related to the loss of friends, feelings of fear, shame or guilt, a sense of helplessness, or shock caused by the horror of carnage observed or the taking of another human being's life.

²³ Figley and Nash, *Combat Stress Injuries...*, 18-29. Studies of U.S. service personnel serving on Operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM has shown cumulative stress results over a period of months.

²⁴ Orasanu and Backer in their article *Stress and Military Performance*, (Chapter 3 of *Stress and Human Performance* (Mahwah New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996), 92. James E. Driskell and Eduardo Salas eds.) classify combat-related stressors in four categories of: danger and threat, fatigue (including sleep deprivation and sustained and continuous operations), workload/information load, and environmental factors (noise, heat/cold, altitude). It is assumed that altitude is considered in their model as Judith M. Orasanu works at the NASA Ames Research Center.

Social stressors may be mission specific but may also be based on national or international opinion. They may include a lack of privacy or private time, and the media portrayal or public opinion (nationally or internationally) towards the military and the conduct and progress of its mission.

Spiritual stressors may result in a loss of one's faith, or an inability to forgive or feel forgiven for actions that have occurred.

In the most general terms, the research...has shown (a) that the presence of certain stressors leads to decrements in performance, (b) there seem to be significant variations in the effects of stress on different individuals, particularly with respect to experience, and (c) tasks that vary in their demanding characteristics are differentially sensitive to various types of stressors.²⁵

Nash further purports that in the study and understanding of stress injuries several approaches to grouping stress injuries according to phenomena have been employed. This is often difficult due to nature of the injuries making classification by symptom ambiguous. Nash categorizes stress injuries by their respective "precipitating" stressors: traumatic stress, operational fatigue, and grief.²⁶

The key enabler in traumatic injuries is exposure to psychological trauma that is "so toxic that a full and immediate adaptive response to it is impossible."²⁷ Toxicity of

²⁵ Judith M. Orasanu and Patricia Backer, "Stress and Military Performance," in *Stress and Human Performance* (Mahwah New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996), 92.

²⁶ Figley and Nash, *Combat Stress Injuries...*, 50. "[T]raumatic stress, caused by the impact of terror, horror, or helplessness; operational fatigue, caused by the wear and tear of accumulated stress; and grief, caused by the loss of someone or something that is highly valued."

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

an event to each individual is subjective, however in combat symptom patterns are emerging that are predictable.²⁸ Persons suffering from traumatic stress or impact injuries can be diagnosed with “Acute Stress Disorder” (ASD).²⁹

Operational fatigue is labelled as a “wear and tear injury” and was highly prevalent in Vietnam Veterans but had also been observed in WW I and II.³⁰ Operational fatigue is resultant from accumulated stress over and above any specific incident. It is not specific to those who are exposed to combat but can affect anyone within a theatre of operations. The study of these injuries is complicated by many of their symptoms being shared with ASD. “There are compelling reasons to believe that the human mind, like the body, has a limited capacity to withstand external forces without suffering damage.”³¹

Grief, or loss injury, is a normal part of life due to the inevitable “loss of a loved one through death”. “Grief is not reversible. Nor is it a choice.”³² A fact of military service and combat is the eventual loss of life. It is often said that we fight not for

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50. Nash explains that although there is not a consensus in the professional community the following can describe traumatic stress injuries: exposure to an event where there was a physical threat of/or death that elicited a response of fear, helplessness, or horror, dissociative symptoms, persistent re-experience, stimuli avoidance that invokes recollection, symptoms of anxiety or heightened arousal, impaired functioning, relative timeframe for occurrence and not due to substance abuse.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52. The study of ASD is evolving. Four processes that assist in understanding traumatic stress injuries in combat are: physiological hyperarousal, damage to core beliefs, shame or guilt and dissociation.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³² *Ibid.*, 58.

country, but for our comrades. The loss of a comrade can manifest many symptoms.³³ The challenge is that in an operational theatre there can exist an initial lack of impact or lack of time to grieve. This can delay the symptomatic response until units or individuals have returned to their home units and can be challenging for individual augmentees unable to bond with comrades who have shared their experience.

THE THREE BLOCK WAR

The Three Block War is a metaphor that has become commonplace in military jargon and is widely employed in both The United States and Canada. General Charles C. Krulak, then Commandant of the United States Marine Corps (USMC), coined the phrase in 1999 just months prior to his retirement.³⁴ In his article for *Marines Magazine* he employed a description of a fictitious Operation called ‘Absolute Agility’ to paint a view of the 21st Century battlefield.

Krulak noted that ‘Operation Absolute Agility’ was not dissimilar to numerous missions that had been conducted and “represents, in graphic detail, the enormous responsibilities and pressures which will be placed on our young Marine leaders.”³⁵ He describes a future of national security challenges that will be remarkable for their

³³ *Ibid.*, 59. These symptoms can be emotional, behavioural, cognitive and physical.

³⁴ General Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War.” *Marines Magazine* (January 1999) available from http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm; Internet, accessed 19 September 2006.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

complexity based on “the rapid diffusion of technology, the growth of a multitude of transnational factors, and the consequences of increasing globalization and economic interdependence.”³⁶

At the core of ‘Operation Absolute Agility’ is the assertion that due to the emerging future security environment the lowest levels of leadership may have a profound impact on the conduct of operations in ever increasingly complex situations. Significantly, Krulak stresses that “these missions will require them [junior leadership] to confidently make well-reasoned and *independent* decisions under extreme stress- decisions that will likely be subject to the harsh scrutiny of both the media and the court of public opinion.”³⁷ Krulak utilised ‘Operation Absolute Agility’ to illustrate a scenario where one “...may be confronted by the entire spectrum of tactical challenges in the span of a few hours and within the space of three contiguous city blocks.”³⁸

The phrase ‘The Three Block War’ was quickly embraced by the Canadian Land Force and introduced by its leadership who had close ties with the United States military community. Subsequently, following General Hillier’s ascension as the Chief of Defence Staff this metaphor for the complexity of future operations has been embraced, not just CF-wide, but by the Government as a whole.³⁹

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁹ Canada. International Policy Statement – Defence, (Ottawa: DND Canada) 8. The phrase ‘The Three Block War’ was formally articulated in the International Policy Statement of the former Martin Liberal Government.

As stated in the 2005 Canadian Government *International Policy Statement – Defence*,

Military experts have compared today’s complex and chaotic operational environment to a “three-block war.” This term speaks to the increasing overlap in the missions armed forces are being asked to carry out at any one time, and the resulting need for integrated operations. Our land forces could be engaged in combat operations against well-armed militia forces in one city block, stabilization operations in the next block, and humanitarian relief and reconstruction two blocks over. Transition from one type of operation to another often happens in the blink of an eye, with little time to react. At the same time, our naval forces in adjacent coastal areas might be supporting troops ashore while enforcing a maritime exclusion zone, and our air forces could be flying in supplies and humanitarian aid, while standing by to directly engage a determined opponent.

Although semantically the difference is minor, the Canadian description varies slightly from that of Krulak in that it envisions concurrent vice consecutive operations within the three contiguous blocks. This is a factor in the complexity of operations envisioned and potential stressors.

In addition to the Three Block War there are numerous doctrinal and theoretical descriptions put forth in attempts to ascertain the conditions in which our military will operate, today and in the future. The continuum of operations, asymmetric warfare, fourth generation warfare (4GW), contemporary operational environment, and future security environment all give credence to a complex and complicated future battlespace.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ ‘The Continuum of Operations’ is the CF doctrinal term that embraces the range of operations, both combat and non-combat, that the CF will undertake within the spectrum of conflict. (Canada. Canadian Forces Operations. B-GG-005-004/AF-000, 2000, 1-3.) Synonymously, the American term

Inter-related to the Three Block War and our future operations is the ‘whole of government approach.’ This term is not uniquely Canadian and is utilised by many western governments. It refers to a cooperative effort amongst various government departments or levels of government to approach a problem with a coordinated effort to achieve a greater result. In the Canadian military context this concept is evolving and is well articulated in the Department of National Defence ‘Backgrounder’ for our current mission in Afghanistan.

We know the success of our mission cannot be assured by military means alone. No fewer than 19 UN agencies are in Afghanistan working tirelessly to help the Afghan people and their national government build a democratic and secure

‘Full Spectrum Operations’ describes the range of operations a military may be expected to participate in. It ranges on the low intensity end from domestic operations through peace support operations to high-end, full-scale conventional warfare. (United States. Headquarters, Department of the Army. FM 3-0. Operations. Washington, 2001, 6-1.). Asymmetric warfare is bantered about, but is not a new concept. It can be simplistically defined as “...weaker opponents [seeking] to neutralize their enemy's technological or numerical superiority by fighting in ways or on battlefields that nullify it.” (Vincent J. Goulding Jr. “Back to the Future with Asymmetric Warfare”. Parameters, Winter 2000-01, 21. <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/00winter/goulding.htm> Internet accessed 29 Mar 07.) It is widely employed by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fourth generation warfare (4GW) is also an emerging popular buzz-phrase, but like asymmetric warfare is not new. 4GW builds on the teachings of successful insurgents Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevera. Today’s insurgents “...seek to combine guerrilla tactics with a willingness to fight “across the political, economic, social, and military spectrums” to convey a message that will achieve the strategic goal of “changing the minds of the enemy’s policymakers.” (Captain John W. Bellflower, USAF. “4th Generation Warfare.” *Small Wars Journal Magazine*. February 2006. http://www.smallwarsjournal.com/documents/swjmag/v4/bellflower.htm#_ftn1. Internet accessed 29 Mar 07.) The contemporary operational environment (COE) is ...the overall operational environment that exists today and in the near future (out to the year 2020). The range of threats during this period extends from smaller, lower-technology opponents using more adaptive, asymmetric methods to larger, modernized forces able to engage deployed U.S. forces in more conventional, symmetrical ways. In some possible conflicts (or in multiple, concurrent conflicts), a combination of these types of threats could be especially problematic. (<http://www.strategypage.com/articles/operationenduringfreedom/chap1.asp> accessed 29 Mar 07). The Future Security Environment is described as being characteristic of ...minor conflicts due to the influence of the following interconnected trends: WMD proliferation, globalization (“Golden Straitjacket”), the glare of the information age, U.S. conventional military dominance, the positive and negative effects of rapid change on states, and the rapid diffusion of knowledge and technology.” (Steven Metz and Raymond A. Millen. FUTURE WAR/FUTURE BATTLESPACE: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF AMERICAN LANDPOWER. Strategic Studies Institute for the U.S. Army War College. <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/PUB214.pdf>. Internet accessed 29 Mar 07)

society. Canada has also deployed diplomats, development workers, civilian police, as well as experts in human rights, good governance, the rule of law and democracy building — all of whom come together in common endeavour in Afghanistan. The CF commitment is an important aspect of the Government of Canada's whole of Government approach to assisting Afghanistan.⁴¹

In addition to the myriad of theories and conceptual definitions being utilised to attempt to predict and hence prepare our institution for future employment, there are a plethora of articles written from the Canadian context. At the forefront of this activity within the CF is Colonel Bernd Horn.⁴² The afore-mentioned plethora of theories and descriptions may be best summarised by Colonel Horn and his co-author Tegan G. Reshke with their aptly titled 2005 article, *Defying Definition: The Future Battlespace*.⁴³

This article articulates the challenges of attempting to predict what the future threat will be and concludes that the requirement will exist for “...adaptable (highly trained and educated), highly mobile, well-equipped forces capable of rapid deployment on complex multi-dimensional coalition operations, and able to conduct missions across the entire spectrum of conflict.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Department of National Defence, “BG-07.009 Backgrounder - Canadian Forces Operations in Afghanistan. - January 5, 2007.” Available from http://www.dnd.ca/site/newsroom/view_news_e.asp?id=1703; Internet, accessed 29 March 2007.

⁴² Colonel Horn holds a PhD and is currently the Director of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute at the Canadian Defence Academy in Kingston Ontario. He has co-edited the Land Force Keystone publication *Towards the Brave New World: Canada's Army in the 21st Century* which included a chapter which he co-authored entitled *Defying Definition: The Future Battlespace*. Additionally, he authored several notable articles: *Complexity Squared: Operating in the Future Battlespace* (Canadian Military Journal, Vol. 4, No. 3, Autumn 2003) and *Outside the Wire – Some Leadership Challenges in Afghanistan* (Canadian Military Journal, Vol. 7, No. 3, Autumn 2006).

⁴³ Department of National Defence, Directorate of Land Strategic Studies. Lieutenant-Colonel Bernd Horn and Peter Gizewski, eds. *Towards the Brave New World: Canada's Army in the 21st Century*. (Kingston: DND Canada, 2003), chapter 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

Defying Definition: The Future Battlespace details eleven predictive characteristics that expand on the intricacies of the Three Block War. They are: increased complexity, the asymmetric threat, complex terrain, media scrutiny and the reality of the strategic Corporal, information operations, blurred operations, expanding battlespace, increased continual high tempo of operations, enhanced lethality, technologically dependent battle, and inter-dependent operations.

THE THREE BLOCK WAR AND INCREASED STRESS

There is a great deal that has been written to describe the future conditions in which our institution may find itself whilst deployed on operations. However, there is very little credence given in any reference to the impact this environment will have on the stress levels and effects on those serving.⁴⁵ A comparison of Horn and Reshke's characteristics of the future battlespace against the causal effects of stress injuries, as previously presented according to Nash, highlights the crux of the challenge to be faced by the CF.

Horn and Reshke's first characteristic of the future battlespace is increased complexity. This is envisioned as a battlespace without assurance of the safety of facing a well-known or predictable adversary. They perceive the "...complexity will increase

⁴⁵ In his description of The Three Block War Krulak makes only one reference to stress. "...these missions will require them [junior leadership] to confidently make well-reasoned and *independent* decisions under **extreme stress**[emphasis added]-decisions that will likely be subject to the harsh scrutiny of both the media and the court of public opinion." Krulak, *The Strategic Corporal...*, 4.

exponentially”⁴⁶ compounded by urban terrain, the blurring of operations and the human/technology interface. Aside from any increased probability of exposure to traumatic stress, this increased complexity if prolonged or repetitive will add to operational fatigue and ‘wear and tear’ injuries.

The asymmetric threat, which is the second foreseen characteristic, will have an impact across all three causes of stress injuries. The effects of an asymmetric threat are well understood as they have become commonplace in all forms of western media. Striking at western weakness by any means necessary without following the agreed ‘civilized’ code of warfare will undoubtedly increase our operational stressors. For example, the ferocity and frequency of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers meant to shock human sensibilities would have a traumatic effect on those troops exposed to either the event or its secondary effects. The constant nature of an asymmetric threat ensures there is no safe haven until one is out of theatre, hence this tension will add to the operational fatigue. And lastly, the loss of life and other cherished values will compound grief stress.

Many of Horn and Reshke’s characteristics are complimentary and inter-related. Complex terrain, primarily in urban centers, will be employed to attempt to minimize western military technological advantages. Recent operations in Chechnya have highlighted the challenges and risks faced by conventional forces attempting to utilise

⁴⁶ Department of National Defence, Directorate of Land Strategic Studies. Lieutenant-Colonel Benrd Horn and Peter Gizewski, eds. *Towards the Brave New World: Canada’s Army in the 21st Century*. (Kingston: DND Canada, 2003), 88.

traditional combat power enablers in an urban environment. Although we continue to adapt to develop better doctrine for urban warfare, the reality is that increased stressors will exist due to symptoms such as minimizing use of force and collateral damage. As Horn and Reshke note, “commanders are often left with the quandary of using sufficient force to win, but risking criticism if there is excessive death and destruction...or using too little force and risking failure.”⁴⁷ This dilemma will lead to increased operational fatigue and potentially grief stress.

Through the characteristic of ‘media scrutiny and the reality of the strategic Corporal’ Horn and Reshke pay homage to Krulak and the buzzwords that he coined. Despite the best training and familiarity with the situation, ‘the CNN effect’ of having camera crews reporting live from the battlespace, coupled with the knowledge of the potential impacts of ones actions in a politically sensitive domain can only add to distraction and operational fatigue.

Likewise, information operations and their increased significance to the mission will add increased stress and operational fatigue. Information, rather than firepower, may be the decisive aspect of victory in the future battlespace. The propaganda war and the increasing complexity of real-time information due to advances in multimedia technology require that military personnel are no longer required to be just competent war-fighters, but must also be part diplomat and part public affairs specialist. The balancing of these skill sets, and transitioning between them, will require highly educated and trained

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

troops. The competing demands for these attributes in an asymmetric environment will certainly compound the stress factor and be resultant in increased operational fatigue.

The ‘blurring of operations’ is at the crux of the challenge of the three-block war. The increased uncertainty of what skill-set your mission may require next coupled with the foreseen widespread introduction of non-lethal weapons to add to the continuum of force application options at one’s disposal will cause an increased level and occurrence of stress injuries in all three areas. Although complimentary at the operational or strategic level, concurrent operations across the spectrum of conflict in three contiguous city blocks, as outlined in the Canadian context of the three-block war, are not complimentary at the tactical level and are a recipe for increased stress. “[C]ommanders and soldiers will be expected to transition quickly from war fighting to peace support to humanitarian to aid to the civil power operations, or any combination thereof.”⁴⁸ Rules of engagement issues aside, the methods and effects of combat operations are volatile and not conducive to conducting humanitarian aid operations or attempting to win ‘hearts and minds’ in the next block. The stress levels of our troops will be elevated whilst operating within this characteristic environment where a risk of collateral damage or death is real. Additionally, rapidly or frequently transitioning types of operations would likely require a change in the centre of gravity and main effort. Both could lead toward operational fatigue. Consideration must also be given to the blurring of operations with respect to the ‘whole of government approach’ and the stressors that will occur whilst striving to

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

achieve continuity of effort amongst numerous government departments, agencies in addition to non-government organizations likely to be a field.

Horn and Reshke's characteristic of the expanding battlespace is one of the few characteristics that may see a less significant increase in stress injuries. The ability to employ more precise weapon systems with greater range and precision may actually lessen the exposure to the reality of combat. Where this may facilitate an increase in stress is with respect to the speed of technology, the requisite reaction time and cognitive processing abilities required and the likely increase in lower level autonomous commands requiring independent operations farther a field from friendly forces. In essence, more special forces type units or subunits.

The increased continual high tempo of operations is characteristic of an operating environment with extended, non-stop operations, the 24-hour convenience store of warfare. This characteristic will inevitably lead to increased stress injuries in terms of operational fatigue. The increased tempo resultant from the compressed 'sense to shoot' time ratio overshadowed by political pressure for rapid resolution "will drive a relentless tempo".⁴⁹ Unless an operational endstate can be achieved quickly or forces relieved, the risk of elevated levels of stress injuries through prolonged activity is significant. In the near term the operational tempo of deployed operations must be balanced against that which the institutional CF is undergoing with transformation.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

Enhanced lethality is another characteristic that could have a lesser stress impact. As previously articulated with respect to the ‘expanding battlespace’, enhanced lethality could serve to lessen exposure to the traumatic stressors of war by creating a buffer between the shooter and the effect achieved. However as Horn and Reshke warn, “...highly successful autonomous systems will dehumanize warfare, thereby possibly leading political decision makers to turn to armed conflict, not as a last resort, but rather as a primary means of securing national interests, or satisfying political agendas.”⁵⁰ However, enhanced lethality has a dark side as sadly illustrated by the erroneous bombing of Canadian Troops by U.S. F-16’s in Afghanistan in 2001. Increased lethality often ensures death, even if it is a case of friendly fire. This type of occurrence definitely leads to increased grief stress for those directly, and indirectly, involved.

The characteristic of a technologically dependent battle will inadvertently add to the stress generating operational fatigue. Technology requires increased cognitive ability and enhanced periods of training to ensure mastery of the equipment or process. Often this technology, if unfamiliar, will require greater pre-deployment lead times for training and team building. Such is the current condition where predeployment training for rotations into Afghanistan commences nine months prior to the deployment date to theatre. Due to the relatively small size of the CF, augmentees are being increasingly cobbled together to augment units or form headquarters. The front-end loaded time away

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

from home stations can only serve to increase the stress and operational fatigue of a mission over and above that which will be experienced in theatre.⁵¹

Lastly, Horn and Reshke's characteristic of interdependent operations will have an impact on stress levels and injuries due to the requirement for instantaneous and interrelated actions to achieve an effect. Reaction time and targeting protocols will be critical to mission success. Likewise, "the inability to ensure connectivity and the accurate [situational awareness] of all friendly forces will be synonymous to death."⁵²

It is evident from the multitude of descriptions of the future battlespace, regardless of the label applied, that the operating environment will be one of uncertainty and ambiguity beyond the basic nature of human conflict. The increased technological capabilities of our equipment, speed of interaction and accelerated tempo, lethality of weapons systems, unpredictability of our adversaries, and instant media effect will all combine to create an environment conducive to increased stress and with the propensity for more common and significant OSI.

Although statistics on CF personnel returning from Afghanistan are not readily or openly available, with reference to U.S. forces (operating under similar conditions) Nash notes that a 2004 study "found significantly high rates of depression, anxiety, and

⁵¹ Reference was made during a Land Force Sustainment and Force Generation Lecture that current pre-deployment lead-times for training are peaking at nine months due to the level of augmentation required from across the CF.

⁵² Department of National Defence, Directorate of Land Strategic Studies. Lieutenant-Colonel Benrd Horn and Peter Gizewski, eds. *Towards the Brave New World: Canada's Army in the 21st Century*. (Kingston: DND Canada, 2003), 107.

substance use problems among warfighters 3 to 6 months after their return from Afghanistan or Iraq.”⁵³ In addition, it was noted that although any combat exposure is potentially toxic, there exists “...a strong positive correlation between number of firefights and severity of traumatic stress symptoms.”⁵⁴ Stories related to incidents involving personnel claiming operational stress are becoming more commonplace in the media, although none of significant impact have yet to appear in Canada.⁵⁵

Only time will reveal if OSI will become a significant factor in the health and operational effectiveness of the CF. However, given the size of the CF and the current and planned operational tempo, it is not a force that can afford to ignore the potential ramifications of OSI in the future battlespace environment.⁵⁶ Perhaps, given the size of

⁵³ Figley and Nash, *Combat Stress Injuries...*, 57. Note: Research on the DWAN at the Strategic Joint Staff Lessons Learned site failed to ascertain any reference to occurrences of OSI. However, this does not negate the risk to the CF, as explained OSI can, and often, occur post-operation when removed from the stresses of theatre and time to grieve is available.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁵ In the story of a U.S. soldier court-martialled and sentenced to 100 years in prison for his role in the gang-rape and murder of an Iraqi girl in 2006 Charles Figley had testified that the soldier and others involved “likely suffered stress brought on by fatigue and trauma.” (<http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2007/02/22/soldier-sentence.html>. Internet accessed 26 February, 2007) A recent story in the British newspaper *The Independent*, stated that the British Ministry of defence estimated that there have been 10,000 incidents of soldiers going Absent Without Leave since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. At least some of these cases have a link to operational stress, although the circumstances in the CF and the Royal Army are substantially different. (http://www.sandersresearch.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1166&Itemid=67. Internet accessed 26 March, 2007). An article in the Globe and Mail did highlight the issue of operational stress in the CF and made reference to the fact that some CF personnel may be deployed whilst still undergoing treatment for OSI. (http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/Page/document/v5/content/subscribe?user_URL=http://www.theglobeandmail.com%2F servlet%2Fstory%2FRTGAM.20070305.wxsoldiers05%2FBNStor&ord=9006384&brand=theglobeandmail&force_login=true)

⁵⁶ The current CF construct requires a force capable of three concurrent lines of operation. One land-based with indefinitely sustained, one land-based short-term, and one maritime based. All three could be supported by the Air Force.

the CF and our recent experience with OSI we are better prepared to face the challenge than some of our Allies may be despite our lack of doctrinal publications on the subject.

The role and effectiveness of the leadership at all levels in the CF will be critical in the predication and treatment of OSI and its impact on our institution. As the description of the Three Block War highlights, the impact of leadership at all rank levels will be profound in achieving mission success. Likewise, poor leadership can have a negative impact and be resultant in increased stress through all five groups of stressors. Leaders must know their limits and that of those under their command, individually and collectively. Mission planning and decisions must be sound and leaders must be cognisant of their ramifications. As OSI are arguably inevitable, the leadership must ensure adequate training is imparted on all ranks and that the causes and symptoms of OSI are known and that a command environment is fostered where assistance is available without stigma or career ramifications. Failure to do so would be resultant in a failure of the duty of care with which we are charged for our subordinates.

OPERATIONAL STRESS MANAGEMENT IN THE CF

Stress management is not a new term in the CF but has taken on greater prominence since the 1990's.⁵⁷ As a result of Canada's post-Cold War experience in the Balkans and Rwanda in the 1990's the challenge of operational stress gained in

⁵⁷ Department of National Defence, Directorate of Preventative Medicine, Surgeon General Branch. CFPA-MD 007-114 JD-001 1988, *Stress and You* (Ottawa: DND, Canada, 1988). and CFPA-MD 007-114 JD-004 Preparing for Critical Incident Stress (Ottawa: DND, Canada, 1994).

significance and awareness. The Croatia Board of Inquiry highlighted numerous shortcomings in the preparations for, and in the conduct of, operations in a new type of threat environment.⁵⁸ The creation of the office of the Ombudsman was a direct result of the Inquiry and ensured that the leadership in the CF and government paid the appropriate attention to the issue.⁵⁹ In particular, the experience in Rwanda was a catalyst for the development of the Operational Stress Injury Social Support Program (OSISS). OSISS has been highlighted in *Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management* with its own chapter.

OSISS is a collaborative effort between the CF and the Department of Veteran's Affairs. Armed Forces Council approved its inception in October of 2001. The program defines operational stress injury as "...any persistent psychological difficulty resulting from operational duties performed by a Canadian Forces member,"⁶⁰ however, the term is not intended for use in medical or legal context. The significance of OSISS within the realm of stress related injuries is that, along with a similar program executed by the Royal Marines, it is a peer support program designed to elevate awareness, understanding and acceptance of the existence of OSI.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Department of National Defence. Reports and Studies. *Board of Inquiry – Croatia* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2000).

⁵⁹ Andre Marin, Ombudsman, National Defence and Canadian Forces. Follow-up Report. Review of DND/CF Actions on OSI (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2002).

⁶⁰ Figley and Nash, *Combat Stress Injuries...*, 266.

⁶¹ The CF Personnel Newsletter Issue 10/05 – 19 October 2005 highlighted 'The reality of OSI' and provided an overview and contact information for the OSISS Program. http://www.forces.gc.ca/hr/cfpn/engraph/10_05/1_05osiss_stress-injuries_e.asp. Internet, accessed 9 March, 2007.

OSISS is ground breaking, as researchers have never studied the effects of a formal peer support program established within an injured group such as a military. There is professional reluctance within the medical community over role of the injured in helping peers, and resistance to self-help. Interdepartmental evaluation of the OSISS peer support network determined that “a strong social support network is a key determining factor in returning CF members and retirees suffering from Op stress injury to good health and helping them stay healthy.”⁶²

Within the CF stress management falls within the remit of the Health Services Branch. Within the auspices of the ‘Strengthening The Forces’ is the ‘Stress: Take Charge’ program. This program involves locally run workshops to educate CF members on stress issues with a focus on developing an individual approach to stress management.⁶³ Additionally, the Health Services Branch operates five regional Operational Trauma and Stress Support Centres (OTSSC).⁶⁴ These centres are designed to augment, not replace, existing health care services. The importance of these centres, and the growing challenges of OSI, was highlighted in the last Federal Budget.⁶⁵

⁶² Figley and Nash, *Combat Stress Injuries...*, 279.

⁶³ Department of National Defence, Strengthening The Forces. *Stress: Take Charge*. Available from http://www.forces.gc.ca/health/services_promotion/engraph/think_stress_e.asp; Internet accessed 9 March 2007.

⁶⁴ Department of National Defence, Mission Background – *Operational Trauma and Stress Support Centres*. Available from http://www.forces.gc.ca/health/services/otssc/engraph/mission_back_e.asp; Internet, accessed 5 March 2007.

⁶⁵ In the 2007 Federal Budget (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/budget2007/#s18>; Internet, accessed 19 March 2007) the Government specifically stated: “Five new Operational Stress Injury Clinics will be established, at a cost of \$10 million a year, to help Canadian Forces members, as well as veterans and their families. The government will spend \$19 million in 2007-08 and \$20 million thereafter to establish a veterans’ ombudsman.”

CONCLUSION

Military operations, by any description, are likely one of the most significant and challenging experiences for a human being. The demands and pressures placed on groups and individuals can produce enormous and often overwhelming stress levels on even the most highly trained troops. This fact is never more accurate than when exploring the future security environment and predicting the characteristics under which our personnel will be expected to operate and achieve their mission.

This paper has provided a background to the phenomena of OSI, the term employed by the CF, their causes and effects. It has explored the future-operating environment of the Three Block War and the complexities and challenges that lay ahead. A comparative analysis of the causes of operational stress against the characteristics of the Three Block War has shown that there is the very real potential for OSI to become increasingly prevalent in the CF and the importance of good leadership. Lastly, this paper has taken a brief look at the mitigation efforts currently in effect in the CF including the OSISS programme which is held up within the professional community as an effective model to be studied.

The complexity of the world in which we live, and in the future where we will be required to conduct operations, is a fact on which we have little control. Perhaps the only choice we have is when to participate. If as a nation we are not proactive in combating threats to international peace and stability in the global community, we may eventually

have no other choice but to deal with them on our own soil. We must be cognisant of the cause and effect of OSI, diligent in the observation of the symptoms and quick in their treatment. Prolonged operations in the vein of The Three-Block War may influence our force to evolve into a weakened institution where OSI are commonplace and debilitating. This cannot be allowed to occur and therefore there will be significant and continual leadership challenge at all levels to ensure it does not. Maintaining our institution and 'its most valuable resource' is a leadership responsibility in which we are all stakeholders and must actively share.

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