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**Lieutenant Colonel Elon Clarke**

**The Prevalence of Burnout Syndrome Among Jamaica Regiment Soldiers:  
Prioritizing War Fighters Over War Fighting**

**JCSP 47**

**Exercise Solo Flight**

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# THE PREVALENCE OF BURNOUT SYNDROME AMONG JAMAICA REGIMENT SOLDIERS: PRIORITIZING WAR FIGHTERS OVER WAR FIGHTING

## Introduction

As the world continues to grapple with COVID-19 and the conflict in the Ukraine continues to intensify, media and persons with military connections are leveraging the opportunity to again bring focus on mental health challenges facing service members. The most publicized mental health issues facing veterans and service members are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression. Research has suggested that approximately 15% of U.S. service members deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq have PTSD or depression.<sup>1</sup> Although less publicized, other mental health concerns, such as suicide, traumatic brain injury (TBI), substance abuse, and burnout syndrome can be equally harmful amongst veterans and service members and require similar attention.

Within the Jamaica Defence Force (JDF), the role of the Jamaica Regiment soldiers, in support of the Jamaica Constabulary Force, requires constant alertness and readiness to act in unexpected situations in a context of growing urban violence. The infantry soldier generally works in hazardous and unhealthy environments, which is stressful. This added to the pressures and requirements of the work itself, such as the rigid hierarchy of military service, are factors which may cause added stress and negatively affect the mental health and lifestyle of these professionals.<sup>2</sup> All these considered, it is posited that infantry soldiers face many challenges in their daily employment and operate in conditions that favour the development of Burnout Syndrome and other mental illnesses.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gates *et al*, *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in veterans and military personnel: epidemiology, screening, and case recognition* (Psychol Serv. 2012), 361-82.

<sup>2</sup> R. Ascari *et al*, *Prevalence of risk for burnout syndrome among Military Police* (Cogitare Enferm, 2016), 2.

Considering the frequent exposure of Jamaica Regiment soldiers to urban close quarter violence, confrontation with criminals and existence in the strict discipline and military hierarchy, this paper will prove that despite the initial focus of burnout syndrome being limited to healthcare providers, infantry soldiers are just as susceptible to burnout syndrome because they experience similar stressful experiences, such as overload, increased deployments, limited job control and having to constantly live in a state of alertness. The research will focus specifically on the infantry soldiers, who are continuously deployed in Zones of Special Operations (ZOSO) and State of Emergency (SOE) across the island.

### **Burnout Syndrome**

Burnout syndrome or simply burnout is a group of signs and symptoms of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion affecting professionals in the helping or service field.<sup>3</sup> In healthcare, it is generally defined as the emotional exhaustion that results from an innate stress response to the workplace with some definitions including reduced or perceived lack of personal accomplishment.<sup>4</sup> The main feature of burnout is exhaustion and it occurs frequently among individuals who work with people; as their emotional resources are exhausting, they feel unable to give anymore.<sup>5</sup> An understanding of burnout syndrome demands consideration of aspects relating to work performance, management, and the social and environmental context.<sup>6</sup> The work environment plays a significant role in this regard and has a high potential to cause physical, social and psychological harm, which might be felt through the experience of occupational

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<sup>3</sup> A. Coleman, *et al*, *Improving Resilience and Combating Burnout in US Army Health Care Teams* (J Am Board Fam Med, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> J. Montero-Marin, *et al*, *A new definition of burnout syndrome based on Farber's proposal* (Journal of occupational medicine and toxicology, 2009), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Christina Maslach and S.E. Jackson, *The measurement of experienced burnout* (Journal of Organizational Behavior, 1981), 99.

<sup>6</sup> D. Salvagioni *et al*, *Physical, psychological and occupational consequences of job burnout: A systematic review of prospective studies* (PloS one vol. 12, 2017), 2.

stress.<sup>7</sup> Healthcare providers are one of the groups with the highest rates of burnout syndrome as a function of the responsibilities inherent to the task of providing care to people, their direct influence on the maintenance of life, and the need to cope with death.<sup>8</sup>

The physical symptoms include, inter alia, low energy, chronic fatigue, weariness, accident-proneness, frequent headaches, nausea, muscle tension in the shoulders and neck, back pains, changes in eating habits and weight, and sleep disturbances.<sup>9</sup> Emotional symptoms may involve feelings of depression, hopelessness, and entrapment. Behaviourally, it may be evidenced by incessant, uncontrollable crying or diminished coping and control mechanisms. Mental exhaustion may be evidenced by dissatisfaction and negative attitudes toward oneself, toward work, and life in general.<sup>10</sup>

Burnout is multi-factorial involving personal, environmental, and organizational factors.<sup>11</sup> These include work-life imbalances, having too many competing priorities, administrative demands, inadequate staffing, and lack of professional efficacy. Burnout results from the erosion of a person's capacity to cope with chronic occupational stressors over time and is rarely caused by a single event.<sup>12</sup>

## **Military Life**

Military forces are trained and equipped to protect their countries in times of military conflict and war. The Jamaica Defence Force is no exception. However, with the absence of a war, most combat units operate internally and divide their time between training and routine

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<sup>7</sup> C. Lima *et al*, *Prevalence of burnout syndrome among military physicians at a public hospital in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil* (Revista brasileira de medicina do trabalho : publicacao oficial da Associacao Nacional de Medicina do Trabalho, 2018), 288

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*,

<sup>9</sup> Paul Sargent, *Health Care Provider Burnout in a United States Military Medical Center During a Period of War* (Military Medicine, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> T. Walters, *et al*, *Burnout in Army Health Care Providers* (Military Medicine, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Ratliff, *Stress and Burnout in the Helping Professions* (Social Casework, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> Christina Maslach, Wilmar Schaufeli and Michael Leiter, *Job Burnout* (Annu. Rev. Psychol, 2001), 399.

Barrack duties. The soldiers deployed to Zones of Special Operations spend most of their days doing the same mission at the same geographical location. Thus, they are constantly exposed to physical and mental challenges that can lead to burnout.

Being a soldier is not easy, some may even say it is one of the most challenging careers. Military life varies depending on the Service branch, career choice and location, but several experiences are common throughout. Military life results in uncertainty and many other stressors, which can cause soldiers to experience high anxiety, depression, PTSD and long-term mental health and wellness injuries.<sup>13</sup> Military personnel, considering the characteristics of their profession that include challenging working conditions, difficult and extreme training, lack of sleep, lack of autonomy, specific military discipline, principles of subordination, perpetually changing requirements, and ethical dilemmas,<sup>14</sup> may be exposed to stress at a higher rate than the civilian population, which can lead to psychological disturbances, primarily anxiety and depression, as well as burnout syndrome. Infantry soldiers serving in a combat environment may face additional demands such as personal threat and individual symptoms of work-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>15</sup> Besides PTSD and other mental health problems, burnout has emerged as a particular concern among Jamaican Infantry soldiers deployed in urban areas, especially considering that these deployments occur within their own country and sometimes even in their own neighbourhoods.

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<sup>13</sup> C. Inoue *et al*, *Veteran and Military Mental Health Issues* (National Library of Medicine, 2021)

<sup>14</sup> M. McCauley *et al*, *Military mental health professionals on operational deployment: an exploratory study* (Community Mental Health, 2012), 238

<sup>15</sup> M. Jones, *et al*, *Do medical services personnel who deployed to the Iraq war have worse mental health than other deployed personnel* (Eur J Public Health, 2008), 422

## Overload

The general appreciation of burnout is that it is caused by the stress of working too hard for too long. A study focused on teachers proved that teachers with a larger number of students have higher levels of burnout.<sup>16</sup> Therefore suggesting that both duration and intensity of the workload are contributors. A study of Army personnel assigned to rapid deployment force units found a direct correlation between hours worked and burnout. The more hours worked per day, the greater the emotional exhaustion. Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs), assigned to ZOSOs, indicated that their time off was insufficient to allow them to take care of personal business which is also seen as a contributor to greater emotional exhaustion.<sup>17</sup> Another factor to consider is how the work time is spent.

When superiors do not properly manage subordinates' time, working long hours can be especially frustrating for subordinates:

One day we hung around the motor pool [until] 1630 hrs doing nothing, then suddenly we got word that we had to prepare twelve vehicles to be turned in for scrapping, and they had to be ready by 0730 hrs the next day. So we work all night on trucks that are to be junked. Is this the mission?<sup>18</sup>

This level of inadequate planning can weaken morale, reduce confidence in leaders, and produce unnecessary stress. Maslach suggests that longer work hours promote greater burnout only to the extent that those hours involve dissatisfaction with the nature of the work being done.<sup>19</sup> This implies that even if the work hours are long, if the soldiers can clearly see the importance of their work, then they are less likely to experience burnout. This dissatisfaction is evident within the

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<sup>16</sup> Jim DePaepe, Ron French, and Barry Lavay. *Burnout symptoms experienced among special physical educators: A descriptive longitudinal study* (Adapted Physical Activity, 1985): 189.

<sup>17</sup> Victoria L. Wilcox, *Burnout in Military personnel* (Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, 1992), 36.

<sup>18</sup> David H. Marlowe, *Unit Manning System Field Evaluation*. (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research; Technical Report No. 4, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Ayala Pines and D. Kafry, *Occupational tedium in the social services* (Social Work, 1978), 499.

Jamaica Regiment. Soldiers often complain of not understanding why certain tasks are done or how their work contributes to the overall mission. This lack of purpose increases the potential for burnout and over exhaustion.

Soldiers with responsibility for the well-being of others are especially likely to experience overload and the resultant stress and adverse health effects (eg, Officers and NCOs).<sup>20</sup> The burden of planning and commanding operations where lives are on the line is an added stress that some leaders have trouble dealing with. This is normally made more complex when a life is lost and the responsibility of notifying the family creates added stressors for the commanders. The relationship between burnout and workload is complex. Long hours coupled with perceptions that the time is not well spent are likely to lead to burnout.<sup>21</sup>

### **Increased Deployments**

In Jan 2021, the Prime Minister of Jamaica declared a Zone of Special Operations (ZOSO) in Savanna-la-Mar bringing the total to seven zones active across the country.<sup>22</sup> This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of deployments. Earlier studies presenting evidence that operational deployment negatively affects mental health outcomes among military personnel and veterans generally have lacked conclusiveness.<sup>23</sup> Recently the focus shifted to assessing the impact of long or multiple deployments within a short time. In a 2007 BMJ article, researchers assessed the impact of the frequency and duration of deployment on mental health. They found that people who were deployed for more than 12 months in the past three years were

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<sup>20</sup> R Kahn, *Job burnout: Prevention and remedies* (Public Welfare. 1978),36.

<sup>21</sup> E. Dietz *et al*, *The relationship between workload and burnout among nurses: The buffering role of personal, social and organisational resources* (Plos One, 2021), 3.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/latest-news/pm-declares-zoso-in-westmoreland/>

<sup>23</sup> Robert Ursano, David Benedek, and Charles Engel, *Mental illness in deployed soldiers* (BMJ (Clinical research e, 2007), 571



more likely to have mental health problems. They further noted that post-traumatic stress disorder was more likely the expected length of deployment was increased without prior notice.<sup>24</sup>

Another example of how the nature of the deployment increases the risk of mental illness is seen in US military veterans at the end of the Vietnam war. If the length of deployment corresponds with the amount of combat trauma and related experiences, it can be a strong predictor of the risk of mental illness.<sup>25</sup> In Jamaica, this is not always the case, as deployments vary greatly in frequency, intensity, and type of exposures encountered. Since the launch of the Zones of Special Operations, the JDF has noted a significant increase in Jamaica Regiment soldiers presenting to the Health Services Corps with mental health issues. This is attributed to the increased frequency of deployments and the inability to predict the duration of the deployments.<sup>26</sup> This erodes a soldier's ability to plan and schedule activities around deployments and leads to an absence of work-life balance.

### **Limited Job Control**

One of the basic tenets of human behaviour is the ability to predict events, make decisions, and affect outcomes. If this control is removed it can become very stressful, especially for type A personalities who like being in control.<sup>27</sup> The military exerts great control over its personnel, as seen, by restrictions on where to live and what to wear. The more junior, the less autonomy a soldier has in their jobs. This lack of autonomy may explain why junior enlisted are more likely than officers or NCOs to develop burnout.<sup>28</sup> This lack of control has extensive effects on soldiers and their families, as indicated by the wife of an infantry soldier:

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>26</sup> David H. Marlowe, *Unit Manning System Field Evaluation* (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, 1986)

<sup>27</sup> David Glass and J.E. Singer, *Urban Stress: Experiments on Noise and Social Stressors* (New York: Academic Press; 1972).

<sup>28</sup> Victoria L. Wilcox, *Burnout in Military personnel* (Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, 1992), 36.

I've just given up planning anything! Meals, movies, vacations. To hell with it!  
We plan it and get it all set up, and they send him off. I don't trust his commander.  
He just wants to look good, and he'll volunteer Jack for anything that comes  
along.<sup>29</sup>

The decisions of a promotion or re-engagement board are also viewed as important aspects of a soldier's career of which he has limited control.<sup>30</sup> In the JDF, these decisions are made by senior officers and senior enlisted. While the decisions are based on an assessment of the soldier's competence and work ethic, the soldier does not have direct control or influence over the process.

In the military, the term "other duties as assigned" is a common phrase used to represent duties that are not part of your core function, but you may be required to do them if a superior officer dictates it. This may produce role ambiguity. These duties are often ad hoc basis and redefined daily: today it might be pruning trees and another day it might be painting the sidewalk. Adjusting to this lifestyle of lack of job control might not be easy for some people and contributes to additional stress.

### **Strategies to prevent burnout**

The military environment is naturally stressful, made worse for the occupational specialties that must close with and engage the threat. The constant mental battle of trying to protect yourself and your teammates while acting in accordance with the laws of justification and use of minimum force requires a significant focus on managing stress. The military encourages a culture of constantly striving for perfection. When we continuously hold high expectations of ourselves and others, we can often feel emotionally and mentally drained. If we can set realistic milestones that allow for some flexibility, we are less likely to feel overworked for prolonged

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 38

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 38

periods. Stress is a normal part of life... Being proactive is the key to reducing stress and anxiety. Take the time to re-center, refocus and plan.<sup>31</sup>

The average Jamaican soldier is entitled to 30 days of vacation leave per year; this is much greater than most other jobs. This is because the Force recognizes the importance of refreshing. When the daily routine turns into a blur and weekends feel non-existent, it's time to refresh. Although this is not something we regularly commit to as soldiers, it's beneficial to break the cycle of prolonged stress by briefly focusing on the current status of your overall wellbeing and finding effective solutions to reduce tension. Having an outlet can be a welcome change from the daily grind that you experience during the week. An outlet helps to realign and maintain your identity when multiple roles are demanding time and energy.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes even one day off at the beach is enough to refresh the stress level and start a new one before you reach the point of burnout.

## **Conclusion**

As soldiers, we are expected to be mentally and emotionally tough with a high level of resilience. Sometimes our limits are tested, and we need to 'dig deep' to grow as professional soldiers and get the job done. This growth mindset does not mean running our bodies to the ground, but the ability to find adequate resources and the inner strength, confidence and focus to achieve the next objective, then refresh. Every objective achieved through adversity is a chance to learn more about your limits and your ability to endure more than you probably thought you could.

Sometimes militaries are so focused on achieving the mission that they forget to adequately care for the ones completing the missions. The mantra of the JDF is "mission, men,

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<sup>31</sup> Aaron Kandola, *What are the health effects of chronic stress?* (Medical News Today, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

merit". Whilst it is clear that warfighting must be the priority, the expectation is that war fighters will be a close second. The paper demonstrated that infantry soldiers, constantly deployed on operations, experience similar stressors to emergency room medical professionals and are therefore exposed to similar environments that can result in burnout. Overworked with limited resources and limited control of daily activities, exacerbated by the constant threat to life are just some of the factors that make infantry soldiers ideal candidates for burnout syndrome.

Exposure to uncontrollable or unpredictable stressors are a natural part of infantry life and can lead to increased stress and diminished job performance.<sup>33</sup> Factors contributing to burnout must be reduced where possible. Burnout may be preventable by increasing job resources and decreasing job demands. In any event, efforts must be made to promote the well-being of infantry soldiers to be able to fulfill the mandate of supporting the Jamaica Constabulary Force in the maintenance of law and order. Strategies proven to treat burnout include stress management training, communication skills training, exercise programmes and participation in small-group programmes oriented around promoting community, connectedness and meaning. At the organizational level, reducing duty hours and administrative tasks have reduced burnout rates. Within the military, career dissatisfaction, attrition, alcoholism, divorce, and suicide have all been attributed to the phenomenon of burnout and the overlapping concepts of moral injury and moral distress with significantly higher rates than in other professions.

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<sup>33</sup> Victoria L Wilcox, Burnout in Military Personnel. *Military Psychiatry: Preparing in peace for War*, 39

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