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## **The Untold War**

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**Abstract:** The application of psychology infused with principles of emotional strength and mental health initiates performance enhancement within an individual and then collectively to a unit in the military. The richness and intensity of psychological phenomena generated by the military environment allow us to affirm, without the fear of being wrong, that the army is a genuine experimental laboratory of psychology. To bring level of details to awareness in the military all must have a high developed and acute sense of situational consciousness of the environment of operation. The most severe psychological consequences of the activities that involve a vital risk are: fear, mental or physical exhaustion, behavioral blockage, depression and suicidal tendencies. Beside defining and diagnosing these psychological syndromes, differential aspects are being addressed which are relative to other psychological manifestations of stress, incidence in real life, its causes, as well as means of psychological support in different phases of their missions.

**Keywords:** situational consciousness; physical exhaustion; behavioral blockage; psychological support

### **1. Introduction**

Military psychology represents a corpus of theories, knowledge and practices of general psychology applied in military activities and it is viewed from an individual, community and organizational perspective. Therefore, there is a need to explain and predict the psychological reactions and human behaviour in extreme conditions; a need to optimise human performance in the context of some intense requirements; a need to prevent, diminish and treat the psychological effects which result from the participation in physical and psychological traumatic activities; a need to adhere to the coercion of military groups as well as to the efficiency in the commanding acts.

The richness and intensity of psychological phenomena generated by the military environment allow us to affirm, without the fear of being wrong, that the army is a genuine experimental laboratory of psychology.

When it comes to defining military psychology there are no controversies. All of those who tried to define this domain agreed with what Driskell and Olmstead pointed (Driskell & Olmstead, 1989, pp. 43-44), who explain that military psychology is defined more by the nature of the field and its application context than by a certain set of methods and techniques ( e.g. experimental psychology) or by a set of common issues (e.g. development psychology). Some characteristic aspects of military institutions and activities are the following:

- Authority and formal, rigid structure. The consequence of these aspects manifests itself mostly by high exigencies regarding the capacity of adaptation to a psychosocial environment which is restrictive and in which the human individuality is subject to a process of behavioural standardization. Military

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psychologists must be capable of making a compromise between the authoritarian exigencies of the institutional environment and the “liberal-humanist” nature of their profession.

- Special exigencies concerning the performance and the efficiency of the individual and of the institution. The military organization is, by its nature, engaged in activities which represent socially exceptional situations. In this case, performance refers to situations which can mean maintaining or losing the national identity while severely affecting the interests of a large human community. Individually, army personnel has control over some technologies capable of destruction or generating life losses. This makes their professional performance to have a higher level of stringency compared to other categories of people. Psychologically, this aspect results in the necessity of establishing a set of rigorous selection procedures and evaluating the soldiers’ capacity to accommodate.
- Extreme labour conditions, often to the limit of human adaptability. Military activities have always taken place in difficult conditions such as extreme temperatures, noise or inadequate illumination. Modern technology has been helping armies to raise the efficiency in battles by providing means of fighting in diverse environments (under water, in air, during night-time). However, they have an impact on the soldiers’ mental health as the amplification of physical and psychological demands may affect them.
- Special conditions. The military environment has some characteristics that must be taken into consideration when doing psychological researches. Among these, there are the particular conditions of the military environment (battle field, restricted areas operations) and the military regulations, which means that the results of some examinations are classified.

## **2. Content**

### **2.1. Operative Exhaustion**

Operative exhaustion is defined as a natural state of the human body which appears as a cause of a certain activity, or as a follow-up of a decrease in cognitive and physical energy supplies below the optimum level imposed by the demands of that certain activity. However, there are two major categories of exhaustion:

- Current exhaustion. (This is a moderate intensity phenomena, which appears during ordinary activities. Its most important characteristic is that the recovery takes place during the ordinary rest periods – sleep, rest)
- Chronic exhaustion. (This type of exhaustion builds itself on the background of irrecoverable fatigue accumulation in a longer period of time. This is a syndrome of clinical intensity, defined by the persistency of the tiredness even in the absence of requirements, by the incapacity of recovery through usual periods of rest, as well as some other syndromes such as difficulty in focusing and memory, chest and muscular soreness and pain.) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994)

In the military environment we often hear the term of operative exhaustion which describes manifestations that appear in the context of combat missions, combat training and some other extraordinary activities.

Unlike the combat stress, which has a more pronounced evaluative-emotional component that is usually manifested through a tension state and intense emotional reactions, operative exhaustion is defined more by the relation between the requirement and one's potential. It appears when the stash of

resources is overtaken by the level of demands. From its effects perspective, operative exhaustion has two main components:

- Objective component: the decrease in some individual abilities (attention, vigilance, reaction time, precision and the coordination of movements) and the actual decrease of performance in activities (errors, accidents, the lack of mission targets)
- Subjective component: a change in tonus and emotional dispositions, decrease of motivation, deterioration of the relationships behaviour. All of these can actually lead to the diminution in efficiency in the field. They also represent the main cause of military errors and accidents. Under the impact of negative emotions on a regular basis, the subjective fatigue tends to intensify and increase a lot more compared to when the subject experiences positive emotions.

On the other hand, exhaustion should not be referred to only as a condition but also as a progressive phenomenon of energy consumption which determines the deterioration of the relation between resources and the requirements of the assignment. The main phases of this process are the following:

1. The progressive mobilization phase, which represents the activity debut and implies the actualization of the resources according to the level of the tasks;
2. The phase of optimum effort, whose duration is influenced by certain individual factors (level of training, level of competency) or situational factors (the nature of the mission, possible critical situations);
3. The compensated exhaustion phase, in which the first signs of exhaustion appear, while the subject can still manage his resources to deal with the requirements;
4. The final impulse phase, which represents a paradoxical moment when the exhaustion has been overcome and the tasks are carried out easily. Apparently, the exhaustion has disappeared, but it is actually a warning signal for the imminent energy drop;
5. The neuropsychological exhaustion phase, which happens relatively quickly after the last impulse and is characterized by the massive diminution of efficiency, demobilized state, indifference and even involuntary sleep in extreme cases.

### **2.1.1. Determinant Factors**

#### **a. Intense demands (Friedl, 2007)**

Military operative activities are characterized by long lasting physical (marches, drills) and intellectual demands (attention, vigilance, decision making ability). Depending on the requirement profile, we can distinguish between constant and continuous tasks, intermittent tasks and reduced intensity tasks, that last a longer period of time. The lack of sleep added to prolonged activities leads to oxygen deficit and the reduction of precision in managing tasks and missions.

#### **b. Long lasting periods of wakefulness (deprivation of sleep) (Hawkins, 1993)**

One of the main characteristics of the military environment is the incapacity of running on a regular activity schedule. Considering this, military psychology distinguishes between two types of prolonged military activities:

- Sustained operation is characterized by undetermined duration and it ends with the accomplishment of the determined objective.

- Continuous operation –is a combat mission with a determined duration that includes rest and regular sleep periods. The main factors that contribute to the deterioration in performance during continuous operations are: poor luminosity, limited visibility, sleep-wake cycle disturbance, physical fatigue, lack of sleep.

**c. Biological rhythm disturbance:**

The human brain, according to numerous researches, has its own intern biological clock. It functions based on the synchronization with periodic variation of solar light, on which a sleep/wake cycle has been built. This kind of disturbance is generated by the lack of synchronization between the intern clock and the rotation of the Earth. However, lot of military combat missions are not governed by the normal work/rest cycle, their duration being subordinated to the tactical objectives. This is the main cause of the conflict between the biological clock and the imposed schedule, leading to the necessity to reprogram the internal biorhythm. The most important effect of this disturbance is the lack of sleep.

**d. Psychic stress(Kite, 1997)**

The way the military personnel perceive the mission, its evolution, its effects and their emotional reactions to it, can influence the establishment of combat fatigue. Among those we may also consider factors such as exposure to horror war scenes, being away from family, psychical discomfort generated by the absence of personal hygiene conditions, interpersonal conflicts and unsatisfactory command relationship. Generally, the psychological and emotional picture of all those situations displays irritability, loss of interest in activities, interpersonal tensions and decreased performance.

**e. Adverse environmental conditions**

The effort the human body puts in adapting to the extreme conditions of environment is one of the major sources of exhaustion in missions. One way or another, any kind of extreme conditions have an impact on the level of energy and may lead to fatigue.

e.g. “When I set foot on the Afghan land, I couldn’t get enough oxygen, the air was so heavy... I said to myself: “God! What am I gonna do?” I thought I wouldn’t be able to resist in those conditions for six months, I was thinking of my health, but that was only the first impact and in a couple of hours I got used to the climate.”

“We arrived there at night, we simply didn’t know what was going on with us there... to my left and to my right side there was dust and heat. I was feeling lonely, I had no idea of what I was doing there.” (Dascălu, 2012)

**f. Metabolic limits (physical tiredness)**

Any kind of activity demands energy, and this energy has to be introduced and stored in the body long before it is consumed. Physical tiredness is unavoidable mostly because of the fact that military operations don't ensure adequate caloric intake. Also, dehydration is another important cause that may produce negative effects on physical and psychical performance.

The effects of operational exhaustion (based on lack of sleep, long lasting effort, age and climate) are:

1. Physical effects: weight loss due to decreased muscular mass; pronounced drop of internal temperature; heaviness in motion.
2. Intellectual effects: distortions, disorientation, hallucinations due to lack of sleep; decrease in the capacity of targeting, memorizing and attention; psychical and physical state; decreased reaction time; heaviness in learning and reasoning; boredom.

3. Emotional effects: drop in individual potential; decrease of self confidence; drop of motivation; fear states and anxiety; insomnia; depression, confusion, rage.

### **2.1.2. Exhaustion Management**

Drawings Exhaustion is a natural unavoidable phenomena which builds the expression of human body fundamental limits and therefore, the management of fatigue represents a set of solutions and methods meant to extend these limits. Among the most common methods there are:

- a. Sleep/ wake schedule.
- b. Taking shifts.
- c. Sleep management.
- d. Organizing tactics and strategies.
- e. Pharmacological solutions.

## **2.2 Combating Stress**

Both the combat stress and the battle fatigue are often generated by the same factors. Even the symptoms of these psychological conditions are similar. However, between them there are real differences, as well as distinctive approaches to solving the problems.

The fatigue is the result of irrecoverable mental and physical exhaustion while the combat stress is the accumulation of personal traumatic experience. the fatigue is linked with the normal military activities, whereas combat stress is about confronting the horrors of war, which include intense demands during missions, threats and lethal risks, brutal death and separation from the family.

The notion of “combat stress” has been used during and after World War II, together with “combat fatigue” or “combat exhaustion” (Stokes & Kite, 1997). During the First Persian Gulf War (1991), USA army had been using the term “Combat stress reaction” (C.S.R) which is currently broadly accepted. (Campise, Geller & Campise, 2006)

In official documents from the US, psychological symptomatology associated with combat stress is called “combat stress reaction” and it is defined as “the expected, predictable, emotional, intellectual, physical, and/or behavioural reactions of Service members who have been exposed to stressful events in combat or other military operations other than war.”

“CSRs vary in quality and severity as a function of operational conditions, such as intensity, duration, rules of engagement, leadership, effective communication, unit morale, unit cohesion and perceived importance of the mission.”

Generally, CSR symptoms can be grouped in six categories (Campise, 2006):

- Physical symptoms such as sleep disorders, digestive problems or dizziness
- Cognitive symptoms- excessive alertness, impulsiveness or slow reaction to stimuli, loss of self confidence, confusion
- Behavioural symptoms- carelessness (dangerous manoeuvres), panic attacks, social exclusion
- Emotional symptoms- fear, panic, depression, indifference
- Acts against regulation- ignoring the code of conduct, such as mutilation of dead bodies, killing of the non-combatants, torturing prisoners and drugs consumption.
- Non-adaptive symptoms- the most extreme reactions are: suicide and auto-mutilation.

None of the above manifestations should be exclusively associated with CSR and so several signs must be observed: one's reactions are unfamiliar/strange; the soldiers can't live up to their tasks; the symptoms persist even after the threat has stopped.

### **2.2.1 Fear**

Fear is a normal reaction on the battlefield and it represents a negative emotion that stimulates the adaptation to threatening events, with the purpose of avoiding dangers. Usually, there is a defensive response to fear (immobility, escaping the dangerous areas), but it can also appear in the form of offensive-aggressive actions (such as attacking the source of the threat) (Ohman, 2007).

The military environment is a generator of stimuli and by this, it can induce fear. There are two types of fear:

- Episodic fear which is about concrete situations and a short period of time;
- Systemic fear which is characterized by persistence when the fear is justified by the existence of post traumatic events, it becomes a symptom of combat stress)

### **2.2.2 Behavioural blockage**

A behavioural blockage appears when unexpectedly confronted to a situation that involves simultaneously, an intense demand and an imminent threat. While fear represents the imperative need to avoid the sources of danger, the blockage is usually temporary and the self control can be rapidly regained.

### **2.2.3 Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

It represents a set of reactions and psychological experiences following the exposure to a critical incident. We can diagnose the PTSD based on the following criteria:

- A. Traumatic event-trauma survivors must have been exposed to actual situations or threatened: death, serious injury, sexual violence.
- B. Intrusion re-experiencing: these symptoms envelope ways that someone re-experiences the event (intrusive thoughts or memories, nightmares, flashbacks)
- C. Avoidant symptoms: ways to try to avoid any memory of the event (avoiding thoughts, feelings, people or situations connected to the traumatic event)
- D. Negative alteration in mood or cognitions (memory problems that are exclusive to the event, feelings detached, isolated or disconnected from other people)
- E. Increased arousal symptoms (the brain remains "on edge" wary and watchful of further threats)

PTSD is a disorder that must and has been studied for the purpose of developing more personalized effective and efficient treatment.

## **4. Conclusion**

Sometimes, military psychology is looked upon with pessimism and distrust, in the context of a humanism-pacifist society. It is said that it promotes conflictual values and attitudes and that it serves some manipulatory and aggressive interests. In fact, military psychology has a deeply humanist function and it is fundamentally dedicated to protect the people who have dangerous, but necessary

jobs. In this vision of continuous adaptation, it is essential that instruments and procedures will be developed based on the interaction between investigation and lessons learned in military operations.

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