

STRESS IN PEACE SUPPORT OPERATIONS: RECENT CANADIAN EXPERIENCES

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SUMMARY

The Canadian Forces continues its high profile involvement in peace operations in various parts of the world. At present, over 2000 Canadian Forces personnel are deployed overseas in peace support roles, largely in Bosnia and Haiti. A long-term research project into the human dimension of operational performance has monitored several aspects of deployment. This paper addresses research findings relating to the stress of peace support operations and other human factors. Select details of significant stressors, the stress-strain relationship and several moderating factors (satisfiers, group cohesion, coping styles and perceptions of organizational support) are presented.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Forces is one of several countries with a long history of participation in peace support operations in various parts of the world. At present, over 2000 Canadian Forces personnel are deployed overseas in peace support roles, largely in Bosnia and Haiti. A long-term research project into the human dimension of operations was commenced two years ago to study several aspects of the deployment cycle from a stress and performance perspective. The cornerstone of the project has been the refinement of an instrument called the Unit Climate Profile (Ref 1) which attempts to measure several dimensions of morale and leadership at the sub-unit (that is, platoon to company) level. More recently, the project has developed a broader conceptual model of performance during operations and significantly expanded its field research. The project attempts to survey a sample of contingent personnel from each major peace support deployment at five stages: pre and post-deployment and at three phases while deployed: early, mid and late tour.

At this time, data has been collected for three stages of one rotation in Bosnia and for the pre-deployment and early stage of a second rotation in Bosnia. The project has just completed the late tour survey of the contingent in Haiti which supplements the pre-deployment and early and mid-tour data already collected. In just the next month it is intended to administer a post-deployment survey for personnel returned from Bosnia, a mid-tour survey of the current contingent in Bosnia and a pre-deployment survey for the next contingent going to Haiti.

This presentation will detail a selection of research findings from the available data of the Human Dimension of Operations project.

Unit Climate Profile. The Unit Climate Profile has been

developed and validated by Canadian Forces military

2 RESEARCH FINDINGS

psychologists, notably Major Kelly Farley (Ref 2). The profile has been designed for use in Army units, although other variants are being considered. The instrument contains about 60 self-report items with a 5 point response scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. At present two versions of the scale - one for soldiers in support roles and one for combat arms troops - are undergoing further validation trials to develop normative data. An example item is: "My platoon is ready for combat" or, for support troops: "My work team is ready for combat-related duties." The instrument measures four dimensions of morale and unit climate and several aspects of leadership, such as perceived competence, at different levels of command. The Unit Climate Profile is included in every survey administration of the *Human Dimension of Operations* project.

Figure 1 presents an actual profile for the early, mid and late tour phases of a deployed unit. Eight dimensions are presented along the horizontal axis. The first is 'morale/cohesion' which taps perceptions of group readiness, role clarity, confidence, effectiveness, teamwork, trust and social cohesion - to name a few. The next dimension is labeled 'professional morale' and deals with self-appraisals of constructs such as confidence and pride. 'Ideology' essentially measures commitment to one's role in the military. The dimension of 'leadership skills' probes management and supervision practices of the soldier's immediate superior. The remaining dimensions deal with various levels of leadership in the unit or sub-unit, normally from section commander or equivalent to company or sub-unit commander. In some instances unit commanders have requested that their level of leadership be included in the survey. Each leadership dimension reflects perceptions of respect, support and confidence in the event of combat. The scores along the vertical axis represent average scores, prorated around zero, with zero representing a neutral level of response. Scores above zero represent positive scores; scores below zero indicate negative or adverse scores on each climate dimension.

Commanders are briefed on the results of the Unit Climate Profile. The role of the briefing military psychologist is often analogous to the role of an X-ray technician in a medical team: providing information that a specialist - in our case a commander - interprets from a broader perspective. Commanders have shown amazing diversity and creativity in how they utilize and promulgate the information from the unit climate profile. More recently the researchers have adopted

an increasingly prescriptive approach in briefing commanders - and this has generally been well-received.

Both the research team and many commanders have been impressed by how sensitive the Unit Climate Profile appears to be to the dynamics of morale and leadership within units. It appears to be fulfilling its promise as a valuable adjunct for command decision-making.

Satisfiers. It has been postulated that satisfiers - the positive, motivating factors of peacekeeping service - may act to moderate the impact of stressors. A scale measuring satisfiers has been administered on one occasion during deployment to contingents in both Bosnia and Haiti. Principal components analysis reveals similar factor structures in the two response sets. The common dimensions of general satisfaction to emerge are: humanitarianism and cross-cultural contact, professionalism or professional pride and development, personal development, personal rewards, social relations in the contingent and with those back home, and the novelty of the deployment. We have yet to explore the interrelationships of this data with other variables, however, by itself this information is potentially useful for commanders and policy-makers eager to maximize the individual rewards and satisfaction of peace support duties.

Stress and Strain. A self-report measure of stress symptomatology is included in every survey administration as an individual-level stress outcome. The 36 item checklist is a modified version of the General Health Questionnaire (Ref 3) and contains three dimensions of strain: physical, psychological and behavioral. Preliminary comparative analyses suggest that Canadian service personnel in Bosnia experience more signs of stress than their counterparts in Haiti and these symptoms are more serious in nature. This finding appears consistent with general impressions that conditions in Bosnia are more dangerous than Haiti. However, comparisons of major stressors for the two contingents - drawn from a 105 item checklist of stressors - do not support the assumption that threat is the key reason for higher strain in the Bosnia contingent. In fact, the only threat stressor to feature highly in both contingents' lists of stressors is the risk of traffic accidents. For the contingent being studied in Bosnia, the external environment had become less dangerous than previously experienced. When external threats decline, other stressors rise in importance and, consistent with previous experience, these relate mainly to issues of organizational climate and leadership. In Haiti, more dimensions are apparent in the major stressors, including several environmental stressors such as "the local system of justice" and "poverty and/or begging."

Another preliminary finding relating to stress and strain is that in the Canadian contingent in Bosnia the most prevalent strain dimension is psychological symptoms, followed by behavioral and then physical signs. If additional support programs or interventions were to be considered for personnel in Bosnia, this information seems to suggest quite clearly the most appropriate form of such support - psychological.

Coping. Coping styles and resources are considered an important link in the stress-strain relationship. The current psychological literature abounds with research into the key dimensions of coping. These coping dimensions are generally

considered to be twofold: *problem-focused* coping and *emotion-focused* coping; although many theorists add a third, *avoidance* dimension. Our research incorporates a scale developed by Charles Carver and his colleagues (Ref 4) which measures 14 subscales of the three previously mentioned coping strategies.

A selection of our findings relating to coping techniques are that Canadian Forces personnel in both Bosnia and Haiti report a preponderance of functional coping strategies, notably planning, positive reinterpretation and growth (managing one's reactions rather than focusing on the problem itself), active coping (taking steps to resolve or remove the problem) and acceptance (accepting the problem as unresolvable or unavoidable). This is a reassuring finding, however, emotion-focused strategies were employed to a greater extent in the contingent in Bosnia compared to Haiti. Theory suggests that emotion-focused coping prevails when people believe a stressor cannot be resolved or removed. This finding is a source of some concern considering that the major stressors in Bosnia were related to organizational climate and leadership, which should be amenable to change through active coping. A third finding from our analysis is that no gender differences were found in coping strategies in the Bosnia sample yet a significant gender difference was found in the Haiti sample (consistent with research in the general community, female service personnel in Haiti were more likely to seek social support for both emotional and instrumental reasons). Such differences between contingents are intriguing and will be the subject of further analysis. Nevertheless, commanders could benefit from an understanding of gender differences in coping techniques.

3 THE FUTURE

It is hoped that this presentation has provided a taste of the great potential that the Human Dimension of Operations project promises. There is a mountain of data waiting to be analyzed, including other measures and constructs not mentioned above, such as traumatic stress and perceived organizational support. For example, one finding is that perceptions of organizational support are significantly correlated with the leadership skills dimension on the Unit Climate Profile. The Leadership Skills dimension is basically a measure of the management skills of the immediate supervisor. The correlation suggests that Canadian service personnel perceive their immediate supervisors as representing the Canadian Forces organization. This has implications for change management and other human resource matters throughout the organization.

One lesson already learned from the data is that there is significant variability at the sub-unit level in almost all components of our model of the human dimension of operations. For example, in Haiti, one unit identified only five stressors of the deployment experience causing considerable levels of concern whereas another unit identified 35. Results indicate that morale does indeed vary during a deployment - but not along a consistent temporal path related to elapsed time on the mission - rather it appears that situational and group determinants are more important in explaining changes in morale. Such findings suggest that situational variables should be a focus of further research and that sub-units and units should be a main level of analysis.

4 CONCLUSION

Many, many questions remain to be explored. Is cumulative, long-term stress as debilitating as traumatic stress (as proposed by Scott & Stradling in Ref 5)? What are the major influences on changes in morale? Can we predict post-deployment maladjustment? Which satisfiers of deployment moderate the impact of stress? As the Human Dimension of Operations project reaches maturity, and answers to such questions emerge, it is hoped to proactively assist prospective commanders of Peace Support Operations from all nations involved in these missions to improve the performance and well-being of individuals and groups under their command.

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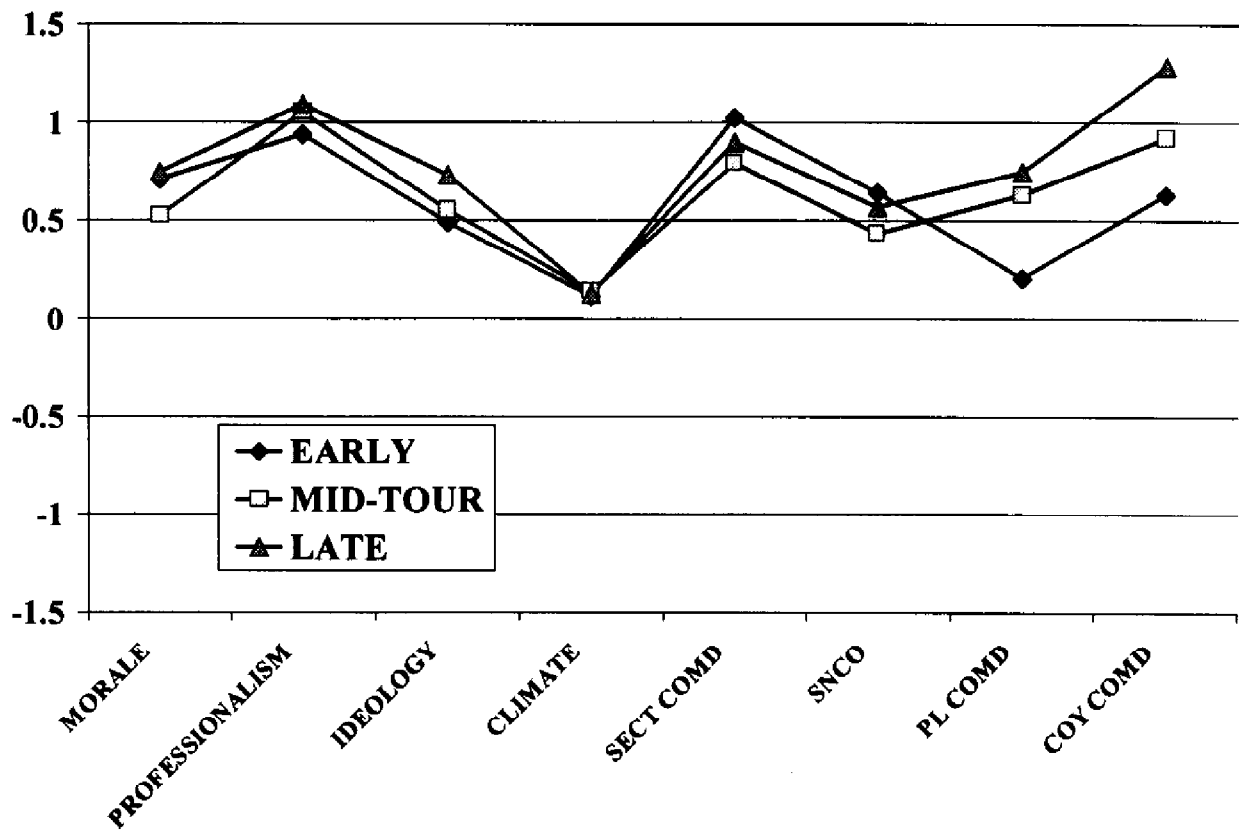


Figure 1. Example Unit Climate Profile