

Combat Stress in Fast Changing Paradigms of Conflict

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Introduction

Combat Stress is a deep rooted problem and the effects are more pronounced in the present day world due to the rapidly evolving operational environment of International Conflict Missions and the huge outreach of social media. An effective solution towards stress management of soldiers deployed in international conflict missions lies in the scientific prognosis based on experience, feedbacks, research and psycho-medical analysis. Two areas of concern come into sharp focus, viz., the complete breakdown of certain well established and respected rules of war which hitherto broadly guided conduct of the warring parties and a hyperactive human rights ecosystem that is calling for greater accountability from those charged with oversight of war and peace. Both these factors have potential to be a very significant source of stress on peacekeeping forces as well as their leadership. The combat stress emerging out of 'no war rule situation' deeply effect the perception, emotions and quality of life of soldiers. Dealing with the negative impact of combat stress on subjective well-being and morale is posing a new challenge for military leadership.

Evolving Operational Environment of International Conflict Missions

On a grim Tuesday morning of 03 Feb 2015, the world woke up to watch with horror a 22 minute video titled "Healing the Believers' Chests". Released by the Islamic State (ISIS), the video showed captured Jordanian Air Force pilot Mu'ath al-Kaseasbeh being burnt alive in a cage. The pilot is put in a cage, with flammable liquid splashed on his orange clothing and trailed along the ground. After the trail of fire to his cage is ignited by one of the masked fighters, he is seen standing as the flames consume him and he slowly dies, falling to his knees. Fighters then pour debris, including broken masonry, over the cage which a bulldozer subsequently flattens with the body still inside. Jordan, in response, executed the ISIS prisoner (failed female suicide bomber) Sajida al-Rishawi whose release had been demanded by ISIS.

Thus opened a new chapter in brutality and a whole new interpretation of what was hitherto understood as settled international humanitarian laws covering soldiers captured in combat. The assurance of decent treatment of prisoners of war (PWs) as per the Geneva Conventions is possibly no more a reasonably assured expectation. There is a tectonic shift in the way warfare is shaping up throwing out the well-established rules of war that provided the much needed blanket of security, predictability and protection to the combatants fighting a war out in the frontiers or for the peacekeepers deployed for building or maintaining peace under international commitments. Only recently, in the third week of May 2015, shells were fired at a UN compound in the town of Mulet near South Sudan's Paloch oilfields killing eight civilians. A United Nations Relief and Works Agency run school in Gaza was bombed by Israel killing numerous children. Nothing is sacrosanct anymore.

From Manhattan to Mindanao, religious zealots draw no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Jihadists target women, children, and the elderly without even the pretense of discrimination. Earlier in June 2004, an Al-Qaeda affiliated group had distributed a video proudly documenting the beheading of a US civilian, proclaiming: "the mujahedin from the Fallujah Squadron slaughtered the American hostage Paul Johnson." By spurning the laws of armed conflict, the new age terrorists have created a conundrum for democracies: how do you fight people who throw the rule book of warfare out of the window? And how does a peacekeeping or peacemaking force under a Chapter Six or Chapter Seven UN mandate formulate its Rules of Engagement (RoE) under such chaotic circumstances to provide a legal framework for its deployment and operation?

The brutal burning of the Jordanian pilot of course raises the question whether captured belligerents such as the ISIS fighters should be considered PWs and deserve to be treated according to the Geneva Conventions? But the larger question is what rules to follow for diverse but similar situations emerging in different flash points in the Middle East and Africa where a variety of belligerents are fighting violent wars with multiple parties? Groups like ISIS and Boko Haram behead their captives, including non-combatants. They massacre civilians. They do not behave in accordance with the accepted rules of warfare. And, they represent no established state or government. Does this make them brigands or criminals who deserve no consideration whatsoever? Even more important and relevant is to figure out the impact of these developments on peacekeeping or peace building missions under UN/regional grouping banners.

Peacekeeping doctrine is in full evolution.¹ The post-Cold War world is fragile. Regional, ethnic and religious antagonisms are on the rise. In many nations, governments as we know it are disappearing in the face of civil war. For example, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNIMIS) has received credible reports of kidnappings of boys as young as 10 and the rape and abduction of girls and women amid killings in a northern region that the UN and aid agencies had to abandon because of the danger. The fighting in Unity state between government troops and rebels brought the International Rescue Committee to announce that it had withdrawn from the area, leaving 35,000 displaced South Sudanese without food, water and health care that it provided.

As we wrestle with this problem, we come to appreciate the important difference between traditional peacekeeping operations, which have always assumed the consent of the parties, and the new peace enforcement operations, which involve the use of force.

A new development is taking place with respect to the post-Cold War détente. The line of confrontation is closest in Ukraine and looming large in the Baltic. The German intelligence service estimates (as per German media reports) the real losses in the Ukrainian civil war at 50,000 dead (civilians and servicemen), which is nearly 10 times higher than reported by the Kiev authorities. No UN force has ever been deployed between the two super power centres of yesteryears; yet, the situation may be hurtling in that direction.

Recently, Yemen's mission to the UN has called for a ground intervention to push back a Houthi rebel offensive in the south of a country where conditions are deteriorating after weeks of fighting. "We urge the international community to quickly intervene by land forces to save Yemen, especially Aden and Taiz," Khaled Alyemany, Yemen's Ambassador to the UN, said in a letter to the Security Council.² The letter also called on the international human rights organisations to document "barbaric violations against a defenceless population". Yemen is not alone. Let us review the situation in Libya. There is a Mediterranean migrant crisis brewing: thousands of migrants are floating on the sea in wooden boats abandoned by human traffickers. The EU is seeking UN approval for gunship plan and 'use of force' to deter boats from Libya. The political instability and crimes against humanity that accompanied and followed the uprising which overthrew President Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011 drove tens of thousands into displacement.

Under such circumstance, should the UN decide to deploy a peacemaking force, it would be unimaginable how RoE are going to be framed and the kind of stress that would come upon the peacekeepers so deployed in atmosphere of complete uncertainty. How does a UN peacekeeping force intervene in such a situation? How are commanders and peacekeepers going to be able to discern the belligerents and the civil populations they are mandated to protect? The dilemmas are increasing manifold and such fluid and confused arenas have the potential to pose great stress to troops on ground.

Psychological Perspective on Combat Stress

The soldiers on peacekeeping mission are also human beings. the relevance of this statement increases in today's scenario because of increasing insensitivity and brutality of the Jihadists. The various terrorist groups crossed all the boundaries of brutality for their own self-satisfaction. How do these incidences of brutality influence the subjective well-being of the soldiers who could be their next victim? Are they ready to accept the death like the Jordanian pilot? What about the well-being of an army person who has no security for his family. All these questions are relevant if we consider them not machines that move to the battlefield for fight and come back home either on their own feet or on shoulders of fellow soldiers and remain equally cool, calm and well prepared for another battle. According to a study conducted by the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioural and Social Sciences at Cincinnati (ARBSS, 2002)³ majority of the army officers plan to leave army because of the perceived imbalance between the commitment of the individual to the army and the army's commitment to the individual. Here the perception of individual's need and expectations from army and nation play important role in development of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to fight. Increasing level of motivation improve the performance and lowered the level of combat stress (Brig Gen Gilbert, 1987).⁴ The limited opportunity for career progression, disrupted family lives are the major reason for dissatisfaction among soldiers in army (Reynolds and Hall, 1987).⁵

Research on Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Veterans suggests that 10 to 18 per cent of OEF/OIF troops are likely to have mental health problems after they return.⁶ Many soldiers take years to overcome the post-traumatic stress they face after the war and face problems in living a normal life with family and friends. In the absence of proper mechanism to address their psychological and emotional problems the first reaction is denial of the problem and then loneliness. Acceptance of psychological problem is also associated with the weak personality and how can a soldier show himself as a weak person; this social pressure left him with the only solution of increasing intake of alcohol and suicide at a later stage. A British soldier Fitzsimons, deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq who joined army at 16 when asked for extending his contract after eight years in 2004 was discharged because of anxiety disorder.⁷ Army did nothing to treat him but on the contrary left him alone in civil society. He was having nightmares, vivid dreams, visual flashbacks and he could also smell burnt flesh and feel the smell of death. He was also having trouble with the law and was sent to prison for nine months. He was convicted for firing a flare gun over the heads of teenagers climbing on his roof, and was charged with a racist assault. His defence was that he thought he was being followed. Then in 2009 he was reported as suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

One of the biggest challenges that mental health care professionals face is the stigma and barriers to care. In one study, among those who screened positive for a mental health disorder, only 23 to 40 per cent received professional mental health care in the last year and only 38 to 45 per cent were interested in receiving help. Furthermore, those who screened positive for a mental health disorder were twice as likely as those who did not meet screening criteria, to report stigma and barriers to care for seeking mental health care.

The US military has started working on the ways to control increasing incidences of PTSD among army personnel (IB Times, 4 May, 2011).⁸ A recent RAND study found that 1 in 5 veterans deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan suffered from PTSD or major depression.⁹ These figures are somewhat similar to those reported in other scientific studies. An initial report by CW Hoge and colleagues (2004) indicated that 16 to 17 per cent of returning OIF combat veterans and 11 per cent of returning OEF combat veterans met screening criteria for at least one mental health disorder. Hoge and colleagues (2006) found that the prevalence of screening positive for a mental health problem was 19 per cent among service members returning from Iraq and 11 per cent after returning from Afghanistan. Among OIF/OEF veterans seen at Veteran Affairs (VA) healthcare facilities, 25 per cent received mental health diagnoses, with 56 per cent of these meeting criteria for two or more mental health diagnoses (Seal et al., 2007).

American Army is an example of working actively for providing mental health care to its soldiers. Veterans who served as part of OEF/OIF can currently get five years of free treatment at their local VA hospital. Many VA hospitals have designated PTSD Clinical Teams (PCT) that provide a wide array of treatments to returning veterans. At the San Francisco VA Medical Centre, they offer a comprehensive PTSD diagnostic evaluation, skills-based therapy (e.g., stress and anger management), exposure-based therapies (e.g., Prolonged Exposure Therapy and Cognitive Processing Therapy), couples/family therapy and OIF/OEF adjustment groups. Prolonged Exposure Therapy and Cognitive Processing Therapy are two evidence-based treatments which have been shown to improve PTSD symptoms in veterans returning from war. There is currently a national effort to train mental health professionals across the nation to provide one or both of these treatments. However, it is really difficult to find any such health care services in the Indian Army. There are counsellors working as all-in-one help to the soldiers but in the absence of proper training and skill they are

not very effective in dealing with the mental health issues of the veterans. It is time to develop a psychiatric unit in the Indian Army to deal effectively with the mental health issues of soldiers.¹⁰

Position of Law on Human Rights and Impact of Human Rights Activism

In the past few years, a number of incidents and actions under the UN watch have come under deep scrutiny by various Human Rights organisations. Such scrutinies are of course, necessary to ensure that rule of law is followed by peacekeeping contingents and the right leadership is provided to UN missions. This process also enhances the credibility of the UN as an honest broker for peace. This is paramount.

However, there is a flip side to this kind of scrutiny, especially if they fail to maintain impartiality and vilify forces that may have otherwise done an honest job allowing for the difficulties of the ground situation. Added with the speed, vast expanse and influence of social media, close scrutiny of actions and reactions of peacekeepers in ugly situations in the past missions as well present can cause great stress to soldiers who are now increasingly expected to defend themselves personally. It is of course not lost on anyone that the situations that evolve on the ground are not ideal and do not conform to all possible contingencies that may have been framed in the RoEs. However, the peacekeeper now may have to keep exact account of the how the situation developed and precisely how he or she reacted.

The Human rights organisations while pillorying peacekeepers and leadership for situations gone wrong, sometimes really horribly like Srebrenica, at times ignore the fact that the so called Rules of War are also conventions with huge limitations and restricted mandate. In the wake of World War II, the international military tribunal at Nuremburg declared that the 1907 Hague Regulations Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land to be the customary international law. Yet, jurists have reached no such consensus about whether the 1949 Geneva Conventions have made such a transition. Many leftist academics and activists insist that the Geneva Conventions must be universally applied. Yet, that argument is undercut by those treaties' texts. The Third Geneva Convention¹¹ explicitly states that parties need not apply it to all conflicts, especially when the foes are not parties, and when enemies do not abide by its terms.¹²

No terrorist group is party to the Geneva Conventions. They have not signed, much less ratified, those treaties. Moreover, it is evident that Hamas, Hezbollah, and members of the global Al-Qaeda network spurn both the spirit and the letter of international treaties designed to ameliorate the cruelty of war. Bloody attacks in New York, Jerusalem, Bali, Madrid, and Beslan are testament to the fact that these groups seek to kill civilians rather than take captives. And when Islamist terrorists do seize hostages, brutality rather than protection appears to be the rule. Distinction between permissible and impermissible violence is the cornerstone of international humanitarian law. In the words of an International Committee of the Red Cross educational pamphlet, "It is a basic principle of international humanitarian law that persons fighting in armed conflict must, at all times, distinguish between civilians and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives."¹³

The Srebrenica conundrum has important lessons. A Dutch high court ruled on Wednesday, 29 Apr 2015 that retired General Thom Karremans could not be held criminally liable on grounds of command responsibility.¹⁴ A Dutch high court has ruled that a retired general who commanded Dutch peacekeepers in the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica when Bosnian Serb fighters overran the town and massacred some 8,000 Muslim men should not be prosecuted for involvement in the slayings. Srebrenica in 1996 was a sinister, haunted place. After the Muslims of the town had been murdered and raped, and the survivors trucked to the Muslim lines opposite Tuzla, Serb refugees had taken their place, stuffing their families into the smashed homes of the victims of the Srebrenica massacre, living on hand-outs, loot and UN funds. However, the fact is that even twenty years after a UN deployment went horribly wrong, the leadership which possibly was constrained by RoEs and realpolitik issues continues to be hounded by Human Rights bodies. In the instant case, the Dutch government has gone to great lengths to protect its military, but not every government can be expected to be as caring.

At Srebrenica, the Dutch meekly surrendered their weapons, their armoured vehicles, even their uniforms.¹⁵ The Serbs were allowed to hunt through the UN headquarters for Muslims they had not already trucked off to the killing fields. But does this mean that the Dutch are now absolved, permitted to remain silent, to encourage Karremans to keep his mouth shut? The Dutch Government in its defence may remind the rights activists of Serb war crimes. Rightly so, but maybe we should also remember the Dutch officer who abandoned the innocents, the NATO soldiers who let the war criminals roam around Bosnia for years after they had committed their atrocities and the way in which they so arrogantly refused to safeguard the Serbs' next victims. So how do we resolve these paradoxes?

Conclusion

It is true that there are no ideal situations and thus peacekeepers have to operate in situations which are fluid, less than well defined and under RoEs that do not provide solutions to their dilemmas. So the best possible measure to ameliorate the potential stressors in these operating conditions is to provide the soldier with as much information as possible on past experiences and for the leadership to be fully backed by contributing governments. Training and counselling are valuable keys.

Endnotes

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- 12 "International Law and the Challenge of Armed Conflicts," 28th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Dec. 2-6, 2003, p. 5.
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