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The resilience of the military leader – defining traits and its ability to influence the operational environment

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Abstract

The military environment, by its very nature, is recognized as a source of occupational stress. The military's approach to measuring stressors, analyzing and comparing them with the capacity to cope, gives rise to both distress and eustress. Challenges arise when the effects of stress surpass an individual's ability to adapt, hindering their response to new demands. Military organizations highly value resilience as the key to effectiveness and success. In the military context, resilience can be viewed as a process, skill, or outcome, wherein military leaders exhibit the ability to confront fear, navigate outside their comfort zone, and overcome challenging moments in pursuit of a greater purpose.

Keywords:

operational environment; resilience; military leader; challenge;
occupational stress; capacity.

Current military operations often take place in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments, along with cognitive overload, caloric deprivation, physical effort, and sleep restriction. Characterized by rapid and continuous change, military operations require military leaders' resilience and availability to maintain both physical and cognitive performance in stressful environments. Resilience has emerged as a critical skill in the military environment throughout history. In fact, the military were among the first to use this term to describe how people overcome the psychological trauma of war, dating back to World War I. Since then, the concept of resilience has evolved and developed into a multidimensional skill involving both psychological and social capacities. In the military environment, resilience has become a critical skill for survival, success, and protection against the trauma and stress of the operational environment. Military resilience is an important topic in both peacetime and wartime. During training and preparation, soldiers learn how to develop their skills and strengthen their ability to deal with difficult situations and manage stress (Cacioppo, et al. 2015, 93).

Acquiring resilience through psychological preparation and operational stress control

Psychological training and operational stress control are based on the realization and implementation of programs that include measures to identify, prevent and manage the reactions instigated by operational stress and building the resilience of the military. These effects are the result of both psychological training activities that focus on the development of individual effectiveness and activities that emphasize the control of stressors (Marineanu 2015, 12).

The psychological training of the military includes three stages: the mission preparation stage, the mission deployment stage, and the post-mission stage.

In the first stage, the training takes place by creating a motivating framework where group cohesion prevails and the soldiers are trained in relation to the negative effects they will face during the mission: exposure to very high temperatures, sleep deprivation, tiredness, and stress, but also other risks and situations they will face.

In the second stage, the emphasis is on analyzing the verbal and non-verbal behavior of the military which is correlated with deviant behaviors that were not observed in the first stage, traumatic events, emotional stress, mild craniocerebral trauma, where the psychologist has the role of taking all necessary measures to help the military successfully carry out their missions.

The third stage focuses on the reintegration of the military into the initial environment and the monitoring of the mental state to identify disorders arising from exposure to traumatic events and operational stress.

The reactions and effects on the military produced by operational stress are in fact, normal manifestations that occur at the body level following unexpected or unusual stimuli, their intensity being different. Depending on the intensities and the different ways in which they can exert influence, these reactions and effects can be adaptive or maladaptive (Kennedy 2006, 45).

In conditions where trust-based, cohesive, camaraderie relationships prevail within a unit or structure and there is effective management, the effect triggered by risk factors can be constructive, adaptive, and advantageous by improving performance both at the individual level and at the collective level in several directions:

- The evolution of personal relationships based on loyalty, trust and cohesion between soldiers who belong to the same hierarchical level;
- The evolution of relations between the soldiers and their commanders, which are all based on loyalty, trust and cohesion;
- The spirit of the corps by identifying the military with the principles and history of the unit or structure of which they are a part;
- Cohesion through interpersonal trust and knowledge established by the military, successful completion of common tasks even if they involve risks, understanding of responsibilities;
- Show courage by saving lives or even sacrificing your own life for the successful completion of the mission.

Maladaptive reactions are usually manifested by mental disorders: extreme anxiety, violation of military regulations or panic. Reactions and effects produced by operational stress can be mild and temporary or severe and with a longer period of manifestation, and approaching them in an unconscious way and not treating them in time can lead to their permanence.

In the military environment that is characterized by complexity and continuous change, it is very important for the military to gain resilience, a fact that proves the inner strength and courage to face the multilateral character of actions and the fear that arises during the conduct of missions. Resilience is the military's ability to adapt emotionally, mentally, spiritually and behaviorally, in combination with mental, physical and social skills to perform favorably. Psychological preparation and control of operational stress are grounds for performance and stability at the collective level and strengthen the military's resilience to face mental and physical challenges (Horowitz and McIntosh 2018).

Introduction to the concept of resilience

Resilience is defined as “*a continuous and repetitive process, the purpose of which is to protect a given system and allow it to address the changes that have occurred. For this, resilience involves, firstly, combining the already existing features of the system*”

(existing programming) with various risk management approaches and, secondly, capitalizing on a set of capacities to strengthen resilience itself (adaptation, absorption, transformation)" (Mitchell 2013, 4-5).

Boris Cyrulnik defines resilience as *"the human capacity to resist, recover and rebuild despite the occurrence of one or more traumas."* (Cyrulnik 1999, 2). Resilience is also *"viewed, on the one hand, as a characteristic of the person who has experienced or is experiencing a traumatic event or chronic adversity and brings a good ability, and on the other hand, it is viewed as the result of an interactive process between the person, the family and the environment"* (Ionescu and Blanchet 2006, 159).

Resilience can be analyzed as a process, skill or as result. Resilience as a process is perceived as returning to normal functioning with the help of protective factors after facing an internal stressor. Resilience as a skill defines a military person's ability to adapt appropriately to stressful events and changes. Resilience as a result brings to the fore the beneficial and positive effect that results from facing and going through stressful events. A resilient leader obviously possesses the following qualities: quick adaptation to new situations, flexibility, ability to keep calm and stay optimistic in critical situations; he is empathetic and trusts his own intuition, finding solutions to problems that arise, etc. (Arnold, et al. 2014, 6).

The role of resilience in current military operations

Military resilience can be defined as the ability to overcome the negative effects of setbacks and stress associated with combat effectiveness and military performance. In the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) operational environment, both current and future operations demand and place greater priority on improving and sustaining military readiness and resilience to succeed in the missions assigned. Resilience is a necessity for every person, but especially for those who work in fields with a high degree of risk and where they face effort and stress, one of these fields being the military field. The complex training specific to the military environment, the tactical applications and the exercises in which the soldiers take part are both physically and mentally demanding. International missions have a high degree of risk where psychological stress, emotional trauma and physical health hazards prevail that can affect participants due to the experiences they are subjected to; thus, developing resilience, strengthening inner strength and psychological preparation are paramount for today's military. To increase military resilience, emphasis must be placed on existing skills (the ability to survive in combat and mental and physical characteristics), managing the negative effects of stress, and the ability to face the fear of injury or loss of life (Fletcher and Sarkar 2013, 18).

Resilience is a key skill for the military as they must be prepared to face the challenges and uncertainties that characterize the operational environment. Soldiers

have to face stressful factors and maintain their ability to act in critical situations. Resilience is the indispensable ability for military personnel to overcome their limits and recover from negative or stressful events, maintain their balance, and continue their mission despite difficulties.

For the military, resilience can mean the difference between life and death, between success and failure in a mission. In the military environment, situations can be extremely stressful and dangerous, with critical decisions that must be made in a limited period of time. The military is constantly exposed to uncertainty, risks and threats, but must find ways to act and deal with them. By developing resilience, soldiers are given skills to better face challenges and maintain high-performance levels. A resilient military leader can make informed decisions, think strategically, and successfully manage the team in unpredictable or difficult situations. He will be able to stay calm and maintain his focus in critical moments, find the necessary resources to overcome difficulties and be able to communicate effectively with team members (Simmons and Yoder 2013).

Resilience in the operational environment refers to the military's ability to adapt quickly and effectively to changes in the operational environment and to recover quickly from unexpected events or crisis situations. In an operational environment, military personnel face numerous challenges and uncertainties, including risks to their safety, environmental hazards, and operational constraints. Resilience is important to the military because it allows them to maintain their effectiveness and mental and physical health in the harsh conditions of the operational environment. The ability to quickly adapt to the new situation and quickly develop new skills and strategies is crucial to success during a mission.

Resilience focuses on the behavioral, emotional, spiritual and mental adaptability of soldiers and is a necessary trait to cope with difficult times characterized by stress. Resilience also refers to the power to accept failure and learn from mistakes, to accept the positive or less positive consequences of actions committed, and the manner in which a soldier is able to face challenges outside the area of comfort and face their fear to act in difficult moments and control their full energy and capacity are real challenges.

Decisional resilience of the military leader

The decision-making resilience of the military leader can be defined as his ability to deal with tense situations and stresses in the military environment, to make quick and well-founded decisions in critical situations, as well as to maintain his concentration during the decision-making process.

Decisional resilience is a key skill for military leaders, who must be able to quickly evaluate their options and make well-informed decisions under pressure. Such

leaders have the ability to remain calm and centered during difficult situations and to find practical and effective solutions to the problems encountered (Allison 2011). Likewise, a military leader with well-developed decision-making resilience can motivate his team and communicate effectively with its members in situations under pressure. These leaders can also take responsibility for the decisions made and manage the risks involved well. This skill also involves the ability to adapt to unexpected changes in the operational environment, evaluate information and take risks, but also learn from failures and continuously improve his leadership qualities.

The military leader's decision-making resilience can be developed through adequate training, crisis simulation, and the cultivation of skills such as taking responsibility, delegating tasks, effective communication, and strategic thinking. A military leader's ability to be resilient under pressure can be crucial in efforts to protect the lives of subordinates and successfully complete assigned missions.

To develop and maintain strong decision-making resilience in the operational environment, the military leader must meet certain requirements and develop key skills such as:

1. **Situational awareness** – The military leader must be able to quickly assess the situation and gather relevant information to ensure that his decisions are appropriate and well-founded;
2. **Goal orientation** – The ability to set clear goals and focus one's efforts on them is important to avoid wasting time and energy;
3. **Critical thinking** – Critical thinking and the ability to examine arguments and opinions objectively contributes to making more sensible decisions based on logical reasoning;
4. **Flexibility** – Flexibility is vital in the operational environment. The military leader must be willing to adapt his plans and decisions as the situation evolves;
5. **Confidence in oneself and subordinates** – Confidence in oneself and one's subordinates is fundamental to decision-making resilience. The military leader must have confidence in his own decision-making abilities and ensure that his subordinates feel equally confident in them at all times;
6. **Experience** – experience in making decisions and completing previous missions can improve a military leader's ability to act quickly and effectively in critical situations;
7. **Emotional intelligence** – Military leaders must be able to understand their own emotions and those of others, manage their stress, and remain calm in tense situations.

By developing and maintaining these characteristics and skills, a military leader can successfully meet the challenges of the operational environment and make effective decisions that will help them accomplish their goals and achieve success in their missions.

Final considerations

Resilience is present at all levels of organizations and is a capacity that can be enhanced. However, its absence can be viewed as a vulnerability, both at the individual and organizational levels.

By default, the operational environment is characterized by threats and dangers, which often present dramatic obstacles for individuals, some of which directly endanger their lives. Therefore, increasing the resilience of military personnel should be a priority for all members of the military, irrespective of their hierarchical level. Modern armies have begun to implement programs to develop military resilience, starting with the military in training courses (MRT- Master Resiliency Training in the United States of America or Battle Smart in Australia), up to the military at the highest hierarchical levels. Practicing techniques and ways to increase resilience enables all military personnel to face difficult and critical situations in their pursuit of successful mission completion.

In other words, resilience is a fundamental skill in the military environment and plays a critical role in military survival and success in challenging conditions. This includes training, developing, and continuously improving psychological and social skills needed to effectively and efficiently deal with crisis situations and the inherent stress of the military environment.

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