

## **STRESS MANAGEMENT OF SOLDIERS DURING LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT (LIC) SITUATIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

LIC hovering around terrorism and insurgencies are on the increase requiring continuous employment of soldiers. Situations faced by men in arms all over the world include combating terrorism, managing disputed borders, assisting foreign friendly nations to overcome internal problems and various UN peacekeeping missions. Indian Armed Forces have a continuous involvement in all the above-mentioned situations. Combating terrorism involves own citizens as well as foreign nationals sponsored by external forces. LIC situations are extremely stressful for both the soldiers and their commanders. The Armed forces of India have to serve in terrain varying from high mountains like Siachen Glacier with post up to 2100 feet without oxygen to deserts and forested areas. Operations include operating on foreign land, as was the case during OP PAWAN in Sri Lanka. There is a need to manage stress caused to ensure that soldiers are able to optimize performance and lead a healthy life. To this end a study was undertaken to identify causes and suggest remedies to maintain a healthy force, which performs optically. Personal experiences of the Author who has served in the Army for Thirty-Five years were also taken into account. Data thus collected was analyzed using statistical techniques with the help of software and conclusions arrived at.

The recommendations cover a vast field encompassing operations, training, technology up gradation and absorption, moral boosting factors, family support and other measures, which would assist in enhancing operational efficiency. Some of the recommendations are not only valid for Indian Armed Forces but also for the soldiers across the world involved in combating such situations.

**Keywords:** Stress management, LIC environment, managing stress on soldiers.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Post Second World War, warfare has undergone a sea change. All out war that is High Intensity Conflicts (HIC) using Nuclear weapons is a distinct possibility but probability is low. Medium Intensity conflicts (MIC) using conventional weapons are common but are short and intense because of high cost and fear of reaching nuclear threshold (Keagan 1976). It is LIC, which engulfs almost the entire world. These conflicts can carry on for years with no end in sight. Stress takes its toll in any form of warfare. While HIC is a distinct possibility, MIC type of conventional war is common in most parts of the world. Indian Army has faced four such wars since independence. In addition a limited war took place at Kargil in the year 1999. However, in such conflicts visibility of enemy, well-defined objectives and freedom to use force reduces stress factor. LIC situations are prolonged with tremendous restrictions placed on the soldiers with vague instructions. Situations, which may be considered under LIC, are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

**Terrorism and Insurgency.** Historically, revolutionary warfare has engulfed the world almost since the birth of armed conflicts. Terrorism is generally referred to conflicts where local population is not supporting the cause of the hostiles who may have external support. The Population is either neutral or support the authorities. During mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Central American revolutionaries like General Bayo and Che Ghuara were famous. Lately, the spectrum has shifted towards Islamic Fundamentalism. In India, Mao revolutionaries popularly known as Nexalities fall in this category. They are active in the Central part of the country where Para Military forces are deployed to combat them. Insurgency is referred to where local population is supporting the cause of the hostiles. In India it all began in 1956 with Nagaland Insurgents asking for independence with active support from China. Then it spread to Mizoram, Manipur. Now it is contained to a large extent. Total normalcy has been restored in Mizoram after the peace accord. Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been a bone of contention between India and Pakistan since independence. However, violent situation erupted in 1989 requiring large number of soldiers. The situation continues till date though contained with no end in sight. Indian Armed Forces were also called upon to fight the Tamil insurgents in Sri Lanka for two years. In other parts of the world counter insurgent forces were successful in Malaya, Indonesia, Philippines Vietnam (French) and in many other countries. While in China, Vietnam and Cuba the revolutionaries succeeded.

**Disputed Border Management.** India has disputed borders with both Pakistan and China. While the border with China is fairly stable (since 1962) except for small incidents. Border with Pakistan in J&K is violent. It is known as Line of Control (LC), which does not follow well-defined features but runs along a line where the 1971 War ended. There is a regular exchange of fire including use of artillery and other weapons. In other parts of the world maritime disputes and claims of each other's territory are common.

**United Nation's Missions.** It involves functioning with multinational forces in a foreign country. Further there are many restrictions placed on the use of force. Language problem, command and control complications, lack of knowledge of other friendly nation's way of functioning and lack of clarity of task causes stress on soldiers.

These kinds of operations which are quite different from the conventional war for which the soldiers are fully trained and equipped, generates lot of pressure on soldiers as well as their leaders (Officers). Stress manifests on the soldiers in all kind of conflicts but during LIC it is maximum. These kinds of operations are never ending. The stress if not managed is likely to have a telling effect on the combat efficiency (CE) of the forces combating these situations.

Stress in the form of shell shock (Boering1979) was first recognized during the First World War where psychological casualties were encountered. Since then most countries have taken number of measures to contain stress among soldiers. US army provides psychological counseling at various levels of command. Most armies have spiritual guidance build in the form of religious teachers and clergy to support. Indian Army has religious teachers depending upon the compositions of the troops due to ethnic and religious differences among them. The fighting arms like the Infantry, Armored corps, and Engineers maintain a cohesive structure with at least sub units from the same ethnic group. It is also based on martial and non-martial races inherited from the British. The British also have similar structure with Irish regiment, Scottish regiment and so on. This takes care of different food habits, religious rituals and beliefs, and management of their administration and employment. For example, a Gorkha Unit would require detailed briefing with clear orders while a soldier of Sikh Regiment would exercise lot of initiative with minimum orders; though they would require different style to manage their discipline. Troops fight for Regimental and self-prestige rather than solely for the nation (Marshall 1969).

### **Need for the Study**

Thus a need was felt to undertake a study to identify causes of stress and device an organizational and training model to ensure that CE is maintained at acceptable levels. Such a study required thorough understanding of not only soldier's psychology but also knowledge of their functions and their background.

### **Aim**

The Aim of the study was to examine causes of stress experienced by soldiers of Indian Army involved in LIC and to recommend models to optimize their Combat Efficiency.

### **Methodology**

Questionnaires were designed for officers and other ranks (ORs) who were actively involved in counter insurgency as well as border management. Though it covered a population of about half a million soldiers, sample size due to constraints of time, approachability and other factors was restricted to 150 in each category. Thus a total of 300 officers and 300 ORs were given the questionnaires. Each category had a different questionnaire. For Officers the questionnaire was in English while for ORs it was in Roman Hindi. For their responses likert scale was used. In addition to the questionnaire, four case studies, which had led to suicide and/or soldier running amok, were selected to be included in the research. These case studies pertained to different sectors and different composition of troops.

**Analysis.** Having collected the data was analyzed statically using SPSS PC+ windows version. Tools like Factor analysis, Correlations and deviations' were used for the purpose of discussion and interpretation of results. Analysis of the questionnaire, case studies and the experience gained during 35 years of service, led to number of discussion points whereby causes of stress and recommendations regarding measures to overcome the stress to maintain CE at optimum level emerged.

### **Causes**

**Diversity of terrain.** Indian Army is operating in various types of terrain. Siachen Glacier is the highest battlefield in the world. Troops are holding posts like BANNA post (2100 feet above MSL) without oxygen.

Entire LC is in mountainous terrain with varying altitudes. The valley Area where Anti National elements (ANEs) are operating has built up area as well as forested area. In the Northeast States it is operating against the insurgents in thickly forested area. International border in Punjab is in the plains while in Rajasthan it is desert. Operation in difficult area and adapting to different types of terrain is a factor for causing stress.

**Invisibility of the Enemy.** Unlike conventional war, ANEs freely mingle with civil population making it difficult to identify. Troops are holding the LC in mountainous areas with large gaps from where infiltration takes place, requiring troops to be constantly on the vigil.

**Monotony of Operations.** In LIC situations operations are repetitive in nature. Ambushes, patrolling, road opening to allow convoys to pass through and so on are repetitive. Boredom sets in because 95% of the operations result in nothing to report. Once a pattern sets in suddenly ANEs ambush a patrol to cause casualties.

**Control of Emotions.** Even when a sub unit suffers casualties' retaliation has to be with caution in order to avoid collateral damage. Sometimes fire has to be held and allow ANEs to escape. Unlike, business environment armed conflicts have no room for mistakes. Slight error in judgment cost is in terms of loss of life. Anger has to be controlled otherwise it has very severe repercussions. Like Mai lai incident during Vietnam War Indian Army has Valvaturai and other incidents.

**False Encounters.** When an encounter takes place where an intense gunfight takes place, firing at the opponent comes natural due to training and instinct. After the encounter one takes stock of own and opponents casualties. When some ANEs are captured, then they have to be proceeded as per law, which is a slow drawn out process in democratic countries. During trials they have to be taken to court very often exposing them as well as escorts to danger. The judges receive threatening letters, which makes some of them decide in favor of the accused. Even if they are imprisoned it gives leverage to ANEs leadership to hold hostages to bargain their release. To overcome this problem some commanders resort to false encounters where the prisoner is released in open ground and shot saying that so many have been killed during encounter. Cold blooded shooting causing cognitive dissonance in the minds of those who execute the orders. After sometime they become bolder. Sometimes informers are apprehended to extract information. If Third degree methods are used against them then they cannot be released with apparent wounds on their body. So they are shot and some weapon planted next to them to claim that they are ANEs. In many cases truth comes to light, which makes the culprits punishable under the law.

**Achieving Targets.** There is a misconception in the minds of senior officers that counter insurgency is a numbers game. They tend to judge the performance by asking questions like "How many ANEs have you killed?" On the LC it appears that dominating the enemy by fire assaults shows that a commander is bold. These misconceptions give rise to practices, which are unethical in nature causing stress at lower level. It also results in killing of innocent civilians, which adds fuel to the on going insurgency. Over enthusiastic commanders who try to dominate the enemy are forced to fight on two fronts that is internal and external resulting in unchecked infiltration as well as fatigue, which results in stress.

**Lack of Intelligence.** Since local population is not in favor of the security forces, obtaining intelligence is a difficult task. Without real time information most operations either result in own casualties or draw a blank. This leads to frustration, which in turn causes stress.

**Technology absorption.** Technology especially in the field of warfare is changing rapidly. Using sophisticated weapon systems requires thorough understanding of the weapon systems being used. Back in 1960s when the rifle was changed from bolt action to semi automatic, some regiments threw the new rifles away stating that there are too many stoppages while firing. Slowly they got used to it. During Six days war Egyptian tanks were superior to those of Israelis but they had not absorbed the technology fully. Communication devices, weapons, night vision devices and other equipment require lot of maintenance and proper handling failing which it results in mal functioning which results in stress.

**Lack of CQB weapons.** Counter insurgency operations require close quarter weapons while the army is equipped with weapons suitable for conventional war. Sometimes the ANEs have superior weapons than the security forces, which give them an edge. During operation against LTTE in Sri Lanka, IPKF had only semi automatic rifles while the LTTE was using famous AK-47. It certainly gave an edge to the LTTE causing stress and avoidable casualties to IPKF (Sardesh Pandey 1993).

**Break up of Joint family system.** Post independence, there is complete break up of joint family system with a shift towards nuclear families more so in urban areas. This has affected officer cadre more than the lower ranks. Families living in separated family quarters with working spouses pose multiple problems for those serving in difficult areas. They also resort to unauthorized practices like keeping a batman at their residents. The soldier is sometimes asked to do menial jobs, which they desist. The batman also stands to lose their field allowances causing monetary loss to him. Leave requirement also increases having a direct effect on the operations.

**Fear is of people Only.** It is generally believed that people fear death the most; but the study found that predominant fear is only of people otherwise no one would commit suicide. Running away or desertion from the battlefield would result in loss of face. Security of family members if one is injured or dies causes worries and stress. Peer pressure to perform also puts pressure (Marshall 1969). Among officers there are many who are second or third generation officers. Unlike many organizations, Armed forces encourage parental claim of the regiment of one's choice. One may think that that the officer joining his father's regiment will be soft handled by all but it not so. Having joined father's regiment, one has to maintain prestige of the family by excellent performance. Troops tend to compare the officers with their ancestors in the regiment, which generates additional pressure.

**Threat to Religious Beliefs.** Officers having urban background are prone to Western thinking. Some of them tend to dismiss religion as superstitions. Troops on the other hand with their village background have much more faith in religion and rituals. Trying to change them or not respecting their beliefs causes dissonance which affects leader and followers relationship adversely.

**Gradual degradation of Armed forces.** Post independence, due to developments in neighbors like Pakistan, Indian politicians and bureaucrats have a lurking fear of military coup. This has resulted in gradual degradation of Armed Forces. The respect, which they enjoyed in 1950s and 1960s, is no longer visible. So much so that veterans have to resort to agitation get their dues. This has adversely affected the quality of intake. Local media and the local population seldom miss an opportunity to show armed forces in poor light. Corruption at political and bureaucratic level has resulted in shortage of equipment. During operations in Sri Lanka, a unit had only sixteen bulletproof jackets for 800 plus men in the unit.

**Shortage of officers.** Due to rapid expansion coupled with low preference of career in the armed forces there is huge shortage of officers. Most units are functioning with 50% of the authorized strength of officers, which affects operational efficiency as well as generates additional pressure on the officer cadre. However, there is no shortage of ORs.

## Recommendations

**Pre-Induction training.** All units must carry out pre-induction training for six months for the task for which they are being inducted. In practice the formations do not like to relieve them from various peacetime duties, which results in their induction without adequate training. The training must include dealing with civilians and the local populace. The operational requirement on the LC and in counterinsurgency areas is completely different from conventional wars. Soldiers of many armies when operating on foreign land think that they do not have to worry about collateral damage or respect the sentiments of civilians. These kinds of perceptions can be overcome by over training. Absorbing technology also requires over training so that optimum use of equipment can be made use of.

**Realistic Objectives.** The present system of measuring success by number of kills only adds fuel to the fire already burning. Violence cannot be countered by violence but with love and affection. Treaty of Versailles led to Second World War. On the other hand rebuilding of Germany and Japan after WWII was a step towards peace. Here the objective should be to isolate insurgents from the local populace. This would ensure real time information as well as deny administration support to the militants. This is a war of winning of hearts and minds of people the way General Tempest conducted operations in Malaya. The aim should be that in the area of responsibility writ of the security forces should run. The militants should be unable to operate. If they give a call that market should be closed, it should be ensured that the market is open. Such objectives would ensure that there are no false encounters. It will also give security forces success, which raises morale to counter stress. Winning hearts and minds of people, may it be at the LC or during counter insurgency operations is extremely important to deny bases for ANEs to infiltrate or to operate. Economically developed people are less likely to indulge in terrorist activities. Once people are for security forces, morale of the security forces rises. Subsidies must give way to development of jobs and education.

**Building intelligence base.** Without real time intelligence it is like blind men operating in the dark resulting in void operations with fatigue of troops. Laying ambushes, patrolling and combing of forest areas in the hope that there may be chance encounter results in failure of operations. To build intelligence base protection of sources, collation of data, use of cut out system, interception of communication systems, use of satellites are some of the methods, which bear fruits (Long 1990). Infiltrating into terrorist organizations can pay handsome dividends but is fraught with danger. In Mizoram it was used very successfully.

**Officer's Training.** Officer cadre requires special training and knowledge. The study found that most officers do not have reading habits. Scores of literature is available on combating terrorism and insurgency. Officer cadre must read and digest various ways to combat. These operations require innovative techniques. Copybook approach simply does not work. It is important to remain few steps ahead of ANEs.

**Up gradation of Infantry weapons.** There is a constant conflict between DRDO and the users. Users want state of art weapons while DRDO insists that they can manufacture indigenously. It delays induction of equipment as well leads to equipment hard to operate because very often it is crude in nature. There is a sector stores concept, where equipment is handed and taken over by units on their induction and de-induction. Used by different units effects the functioning of the equipment. It also results in deficiencies. This system requires greater refinement. Procedures to procure new equipment require decentralization. Development of faith in the weapons and equipment being used is a prerequisite to reduce stress and to increase CE (Combat Efficiency).

**Leadership requirements.** LIC environment requires above average leadership, which is not forthcoming. During British days, few officers were able to run the Army very efficiently. Now the education standards of ORs have changed so has the general environment changed in the country. Officers have to be selected, trained and treated with respect to be effective. For that the career prospective of the Armed Forces has to made attractive. In USA, post Vietnam War Armed Forces was not a lucrative career. Efforts were made to make it so attractive that it became second most desirable career in the country. Similar efforts are required to attract appropriate youths to join Armed Forces.

**Changes in promotion system.** There is hardly any change in the promotions system since the British left the Country. Only change was made during 1960s when point system was introduced. After that most changes are linear in nature.. Coupled with steep pyramid structure of the forces has led to a rat race for senior positions. Only outstanding officers on paper are promoted to higher ranks, which sometimes leads to mal practices. Connotation of loyalty shifts from that of the Nation and troops to that of the boss. It also leads sometimes to inflate reports of achievement or of false encounters. It also gives rise to sports like "glory hunting" and "finding scapegoats" for failures. The Author has reasons to believe that Kargil War was forced upon the nation due to such practices. Pakistan had shelved this kind of plans during 1990s. However towards end of the Twentieth Century, Fire assaults and interdiction of insignificant roads was undertaken which led ultimately to Kargil War. Main objective of these assaults was to prove that the commanders are aggressive; hence they deserved to be promoted. Strategic thinking and operational Art was lacking.

**Respect for local population.** Operations may be in own country or on foreign land, though understanding and respect of the local people is extremely important. It is important not only on humanity grounds but also on operational grounds. Isolation of ANEs or insurgents can only be done if the local population is with the security forces. For that, deliberate efforts to communicate with them, giving a feel that they are part and parcel of the same society is extremely important. Use of terminology, which degrades them to sub humans, must never be used. India has large amount of cultural and ethnic diversity. Operations in remote areas like Mizoram, Nagaland and even parts of Kashmir require special efforts to reach out to the people. Attending their social events is an operational necessity but not very easy. For example, Mizos in their social function fill the stomach of a pig with rice and then roast it on fire. Eating that for a person from plains is impossible. Locals were considerate and use to make special efforts to provide Chicken rice!

**Avoiding Co-lateral Damage.** It is a big challenge to avoid co-lateral damage to civilians especially during adverse situations when own force has suffered casualties. Like My-Lai incident, Indian Army has also had incidents like Valvutrai during operations in Sri Lanka. These kind of incidents act as fuel to fire to sustain terrorism and turn the locals, Human rights organizations and the media against the security forces. Discipline of the forces must be maintained at the highest level. During cordon and search and checking on roads all specially women must be given full respect. Fire discipline and emotional control are very important factors.

**Family care.** Armed forces unlike other walks of life call for extreme sacrifice, which requires integration of families. This is applicable to most armies of the world whether they live in cantonments or in forts.

**Overcoming Shortage of Officers.** The shortage has occurred due to rapid expansion of the Army while the system for intake could not keep pace. Due to promotions all top posts are filled resulting in the entire shortage manifesting in the units among junior officers. However, Indian and Pakistan Armies have Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) who through ranks become gazette officers. They cannot replace officer cadre but can take a load off them if properly trained and handled. Present method of having Standing Operating Procedures (SOP) is fraught with danger as tactical situations require innovation and quick thinking rather than set procedures. Training should be based on initiative and thinking would pay handsome dividends.

**Family Support.** Armed Forces all over the world require extreme sacrifice that can result in disability or demise. Therefore, family welfare is important. Reassurance that the family will be looked after by the Regiment and the organization is very important. This aspect has been realized by the Army, which has led to instigating many measures especially after 1971 War. It is During Kargil War that the importance of sending coffins home was realized. During Author's tenure there were thirteen fatal casualties. Author's spouse along with a team visited their families in spite of difficulties of terrain and locations to personally ensure that all financial claims are settled, sort out any family matters and educate them about future prospects of children in addition to consoling them. Approach to their homes involved walking from the road head distance varying between three KMs to sixteen KMs on winding footpaths on rugged mountainous terrain. Such a venture was preformed for the first time since Independence. All war widows are invited for battle honors day and raising days functions of all regiments. There is constant interaction between senior Army commanders and the veterans.

**Respecting Religious Sentiments.** The troops of most regiment are generally followers of one religion or some times two, but the officers are from any religions. Britisher were very careful as to respect religious sentiments of troops and participate in their religious activities because faith is a pillar of strength. Post independence, many officer's from urban background think religion is all hoax and try to impose their value system in troops creating discontentment among troops which must be avoided at all cost. Instead of confusing the individuals their faith has to be maintained. Officers have to be told to be tolerant of all faiths and participate in their religious functions.

### Conclusion

Rising cost of weapons and equipment coupled with heavy destructive capabilities of the weapon systems has made conventional wars difficult. LIC has engulfed the entire world. Vested interests at state and individual level have given rise to terrorism in almost all continents. Most of the nations, which have achieved independence during Twentieth Century, are engulfed in internal disturbances and border disputes with their neighbors. Their soldiers are constantly involved in countering such situations and managing such life borders. Stress is a natural out come of such prolonged employment. Unless it is managed and controlled it can break best of the soldiers.

They sometimes have to face their own kith and kin that may be involved with terrorist or they have to operate in foreign countries with having clear cut objectives.

Indian Army is operating in difficult terrain over prolonged periods. Present research has attempted to identify causes of stress on the soldiers and given recommendations to manage stress to ensure optimum combat efficiency. Breakaway tendencies are maximum in Border States like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur due to centrifugal forces. A centrifugal force is the exact opposite of a centripetal force.

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