



Translational Research

at the USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

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Aligning Culture Training

By Kristin Post and Frank Tortorello Jr., PhD

As social scientists working within the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL), we have learned that most Marines see themselves in one of two states: combat or training. We have also learned that even when in a training state, the Corps' overall demeanor and its approach reflect attempts to emulate a state of combat in order to maintain readiness. One way the Corps does this is to import lessons from the battlefield, like operational tempo, into the fabric of everyday operations. For example, in our facility on Marine Corps Base Quantico hangs a poster that reads, "Killing Time Kills Marines...Don't Waste a Minute." This poster is encouraging those "in the rear" to keep the realities of the combat environment foremost in their minds. We note this orientation toward combat and training for two reasons. First, the Corps has equated its readiness with combat realism in training, as captured in the phrase, "fight like you train, train like you fight." Second, this orientation frames how we use our social science knowledge to assess CAOCL's training programs.

Since Marines value combat realism in training, then CAOCL's training - and our assessment of it - must reflect the realities of present operating environments in order to be relevant to Marines. Present operating environments, whether a counterinsurgency operation or a bilateral exercise, guarantee Marines will need to build relationships, whether with local populations, partner militaries, or non-governmental organizations. It is no surprise, therefore, that many Marines tell us that relationship-building is a key component in their mission success. To ensure that CAOCL's training is well aligned with the operational environment and that it best guides Marines on how to build relationships in the variable contexts of a foreign culture, we have to find out what is really happening, on the ground, in actual training and on actual deployments.

To accomplish the task of understanding how well CAOCL's culture training lines up with the "ground truth" for Marines, we have chosen to employ a strategy of using mixed social scientific methods to follow Marines through a cycle of pre-deployment training, deployment, and post-deployment. In April 2011, we began a year-long assessment of how Marines view the relevance of two types of cultural training to their mission success: the culture and language block in Afghanistan pre-deployment (PTP) training and a country brief for a theater security cooperation

Research Notes

Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, 20-23 October 2011

Paula Holmes-Eber and Erika Tarzi presented a paper entitled "Social and Experiential Factors Influencing Attitudes Towards Cultural Capabilities in the Marine Corps." Frank Tortorello presented a paper entitled "Training Courage in the United States Marines Corps" that explains how Marines learn to dynamically embody Corps core values in the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program.

ReEntry, 27 and 29 October 2011

Frank Tortorello and Kristin Post led audience discussions in Bethesda, MD, on the idea of how an examination of individual and communal ethics may contribute to a better understanding of PTSD, following the performance of "ReEntry," a play about post-deployment challenges facing Marines and their families.

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(TSC) exercise. Over the course of the year, we are researching different Marine units that received initial CAOCL training. Our research into the TSC mission has recently concluded. For this component, we sat in on the CAOCL country brief with the Marine units who participated in Operation Shared Accord in South Africa. Afterwards, we conducted semi-structured interviews with different enlisted Marines and officers prior to deploying and again on their return (their short deployment time-frame prevented communication during deployment).

For the second component of our research, we have been tracking two battalions deploying in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. Both the reserve unit, 1st Battalion, 25th Marines, and the active duty unit, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines, are currently in Afghanistan. Before they left, we sat in on their culture and language classes and then observed and interviewed them as they applied what they learned in Enhanced Mojave Viper (EMV) (or a modified version at Camp Pendleton in 1/25's case.) While we are not permitted to deploy with these battalions (which would be ideal for this research), we are communicating with them in theater using a written format. Our intention is to re-interview Marines from these units once they have returned.

We have taken the time to follow these units throughout their training and deployments because changes in context (from CONUS to in-theater and back, for example) can change perceptions about the training. Over the course of the research, we will have had direct observation of Marines in their training environment, indirect reporting by Marines in the combat and theater security environments, and direct interaction with Marines looking back at their deployment.

We have chosen to use mixed social scientific methods for this project ranging from joining in with Marines in their training to short-answer written surveys because our aim is to be as precise as possible in capturing how the Marines use and do not use their training. This is qualitative research that employs ethnographic methods. For example, both of us sat in on Afghanistan PTP culture training with units at Camp Pendleton. Because we heard and learned the same training material as the Marines, we were able to ask very specific questions about how they thought the training would apply to their upcoming missions, especially in terms of the Marines' sense of their ability to build relationships in variable contexts in-theater. This sets a common ground of understanding that we can then weave back into our questions and interviews with the Marines after they return from their deployment, yielding a rich and dynamic understanding of the relevance of CAOCL training to mission accomplishment.

By mixing and flexibly employing different methods, we also discovered that the Marines were beginning to integrate their training into the anticipated realities of their upcoming deployment. In a "practical application" discussion after one culture training session, for example, a Marine asked his squad leader whether he could remove his hand from his weapon in order to put it on his heart. The Marine was concerned about compromising security if he were to offer a native Afghan greeting while moving into a village. Questions like this provide an opportunity to assess whether CAOCL training could or should be modified to line up with such realities. In other words, bringing back to CAOCL leadership "holistic" examples of the impact of culture training on Marines, and their questions in light of that training, enables CAOCL to decide whether and how to adjust training content.

Questions and conversations about training and how Marines are thinking about actually implementing what they have learned would likely be lost if we were not on-site with the Marines, listening to and speaking with them. Being on the ground with Marines during training offers "real-time" feedback that makes research using ethnographic methods very unlike experimental or quantitative research. In the latter types of research, the researcher's goals can easily replace what is most important to the people they are studying. This can happen, for example, in laboratory environments where the researcher is taking psychometric measurements of psychological traits; typically it is the researcher, not the subject, who determines what traits are important to measure. The "laboratory environment" is not a natural environment for Marines. A battalion training area is more like it, and that is where we think a researcher can discover what is important to Marines who are, after all, the people who get the job done on the ground. When we observe Marines building or breaking relationships as they unfold in a training environment like EMV, or learn about this from Marines after deployment, we are gaining insight into their sense of the "ground truth" that can lend to CAOCL's efforts toward realism in training.

We should note that using mixed ethnographic methods does not mean that we do not have hypotheses and assumptions. For instance, we assume that culture training is important to Marines and relevant to their mission success. However, in ethnographic research, the Marines have the power to contradict that

assumption. Not only might we discover that our assumptions and questions about culture training are off-target, but we could also learn what our assumptions should be, based on the realities Marines face on the ground. In short, the Marines help define both what counts as a good question and what counts as a good answer.

Accuracy of measurement is not the point in a project like this. Precision of what realities on the ground mean for Marines - and representing those in training - is the point. To ensure our precision we will check and recheck what we think we have heard, seen, or interpreted during our interactions over time with the Marines. We will communicate our understanding of what the Marines say they value, what they do in training and in combat, and what they want out of their training to the CAOCL leadership. Ultimately, we want to discover and reflect what it is like to build relationships in a complex cultural environment, as viewed by Marines in the field.

Operational Stress and Resiliency in the United Kingdom's Royal Marines (RM)

By Vicky Jasparro

BLUF

- A discussion of the RM approach to dealing with operational stress could inform US Marine Corps (USMC) programs.
- The RM operate under the premise that post traumatic stress reactions cannot be prevented, but they can be treated successfully.
- As a result, the RM place a strong emphasis on early detection and intervention, rather than on formal prevention.
- However, there may be aspects of the RM ethos and training that could work to increase resiliency in the Corps and so reduce instances of operational stress.

Introduction

In the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, operational stress reactions have been on the rise and in the media spotlight. The US military, including the USMC, has instituted various initiatives and research programs to better understand how to reduce operational stress reactions. However, psychological distress and mental health issues still exist, and there is no clear consensus on how to best solve the problem. Allied militaries are also grappling with the issue, albeit on a smaller scale, and their approaches may reveal ideas or strategies potentially useful for the USMC. This paper provides a preliminary look at how the RM understand and deal with operational stress.

Discussion

The RM (and UK Armed Forces more generally) operate under the premise that operational stress is an unfortunate by-product of traumatic experience which cannot be prevented, but can be minimized and successfully treated, if identified early.[1] The core program through which the RM manage operational stress is Trauma Risk Management (TRiM)[2]. This is a peer-delivered support program designed to identify the signs and symptoms of incipient operational stress reactions at an early stage. Military personnel are trained as TRiM practitioners to identify colleagues within their units who may be in need of assistance. At one level the program's goal is to assess who is currently likely to underperform because of an operational stress reaction and who additionally might be at risk of developing later mental health problems. Those identified as being in need are provided with practical and social support within the unit. At a deeper level, the aim of TRiM is to change culture; to make it more acceptable for military personnel to admit to psychological distress and seek treatment when needed, thereby reducing the impact and severity of stress related illnesses over the long term. The question is, does it work? According to the Kings Centre for Military Health Research, the results of a randomized controlled trial conducted within the Royal Navy suggest that while the introduction of TRiM is not associated with a short term reduction in stigma or mental health problems within military units, the program does have a modest positive effect on unit functioning (as indicated by a reduction in minor disciplinary offenses) and it does no harm.[3] In addition, since TRiM is becoming increasingly popular across the UK Armed Services, it is possible that over time the bigger goal of stigma reduction and cultural change may be obtainable.

In addition to TRiM, the RM use pre- and post-deployment stress briefings (conducted immediately pre-deployment, immediately post-deployment, and three months later), post-deployment third location decompression (usually a thirty-six hour unwinding process held in Cyprus), and a post-operational command-led return-to-work interview. The post-deployment briefings incorporate some of the US-developed Battlemind briefing points to aid the RM transition from theater to home. Although of varying popularity, none of these initiatives has yet been proven conclusively to reduce the incidence of post operational stress related illness.[4]

Shaped by their understanding of operational stress as effectively unavoidable, the RM do not appear to have any overt programs or initiatives designed to prevent operational stress through the creation of increased resiliency. However, it is conceivable that aspects of their Commando ethos may create this effect. While the USMC identifies honor, courage and commitment as its key values, the RM emphasize a broader range of characteristics which are specifically developed during training. These are courage, unity, determination, adaptability, unselfishness, humility, cheerfulness, professional standards, fortitude, and commando humor.[5] & [6] Does this broader ethos result in a qualitatively different experience of stress? In order to assess whether this is the case, and whether in fact these characteristics do help to create resiliency, the ways in which they are developed in training would have to be studied. In addition, research on the ways in which they are used (or not used) during and after stressful events would indicate whether or not these aspects of the RM ethos have a role in operational stress prevention. Research like this might be worth pursuing in more detail at the operational level.

Special thanks to LtCol. Colby Corrin, RM, and Professor Neil Greenberg, Surgeon Captain Royal Navy, for their comments and review.

Notes:

[1] Royal Navy, "Identifying the Invisible Wounds of Trauma," 2010.

<http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/operations-and-support/establishments/naval-bases-and-air-stations/hmnb-portsmouth/news/identifying-the-invisible-wounds-of-trauma/>, accessed on 3 November, 2011.

[2] A somewhat comparable program to TRiM in the USMC is the Operational Stress Control and Readiness (OSCAR) Program. However, while TriM is designed specifically to stay within the military culture and not involve any mental health professionals, OSCAR embeds mental health professionals as combat/operational stress control specialists. In addition, the OSCAR program provides mental health care at the small unit level while TRiM provides practical and social support and then identifies individuals who require additional mental health care and advises them on where to get it. See "Operational Stress Control and Readiness (OSCAR): The United States Marine Corps Initiative to Deliver Mental Health Services to Operating Forces," Captain William P. Nash, Medical Corps, United States Navy.

<ftp://ftp.rta.nato.int/PubFullText/RTO/MP/RTO-MP-HFM-134/MP-HFM-134-25.pdf>, accessed on 28 November, 2011.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Kings Centre for Military Health Research, A Fifteen Year Report," Kings College London, September 2010. http://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/15_Year_Report_Final%5b1%5d.pdf, accessed on November 21, 2011.

[5] Royal Marines, "Ethos and Beliefs."

<http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/sitecore/content/home/the-fleet/the-royal-marines/about-the-royal-marines/ethos-and-beliefs>, accessed on 21 November, 2011

[6] Anthony King, "The Ethos of the Royal Marines," University of Exeter, Department of Sociology, May 2004.

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