Serving in Bosnia Made Me Appreciate Living in Bristol: Stressful Experiences, Attitudes, and Psychological Needs of Members of the United Kingdom Armed Forces

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Peacekeeping operations form an increasing part of the role of the U.K. Armed Forces. This study identified perceived needs for training before such operations, experiences of stress during deployments, beliefs and attitudes regarding psychological support and debriefing on return, general attitudes toward peacekeeping duties, and positive aspects of the peacekeeping role. Although nearly all peacekeepers were exposed to a variety of experiences, most perceived stress came from professional difficulties and frustrations with the occupational role of being a peacekeeper, rather than from dangerous situations. The exception was a significant fear of land mines. For many, peacekeeping had a positive impact on soldiers' lives, most commonly an appreciation of "things back home." Respondents' opinions about the peacekeeping experience vary greatly. Additional training addressing and exploring potential conflicts between the traditional role of the soldier and the role of the peacekeeper may be useful.

Introduction

Since 1948, there have been 59 U.N. peacekeeping operations throughout the world, with 16 current operations in 2005.[1] As the number of peacekeeping operations has increased, so has their importance at social, political, and media levels. Peacekeeping operations may present particular challenges for some nations whose military personnel are trained solely for conventional war roles. Although U.K. military personnel are trained for both conventional war roles and peacekeeping, the nature of peacekeeping itself is also evolving, from the traditional neutral presence to oversee peace accords to dealing with new, complex, and potentially more dangerous kinds of peacekeeping.[2,3]

Previous research examined some of the health-related difficulties experienced by peacekeepers both during and after return from operations, but with very different estimates of prevalence rates.[4–8] Limited information exists about strategies, training, debriefing, and social learning theory and modeling that may help prepare and support peacekeepers regarding the broad spectrum of issues they face, both in the field and on their return home. Political conflict resolution training has been introduced in some settings, but it is only sporadically used among peacekeepers before deployment. Psychological debriefing in military settings has a long history and, as far as the United Kingdom is concerned, has come and gone. Formal de-

briefing within the U.K. military ceased in 2000, because evidence suggested that single-session psychological debriefing was ineffective.[9,10] However, there is still considerable debate about what, if anything, should be done for peacekeepers when they return from operations.

There is limited knowledge of peacekeepers' perceptions of what types of support they would find useful before, during, and on return from operations. This article presents narrative responses from 342 peacekeepers about future training, psychological debriefings, peacekeeping duties, and experience during and on return from deployment.

Methods

A questionnaire inquiring about peacekeeping operations was sent to 3,322 service personnel along with other questionnaires that were part of a series of follow-up studies of the King's U.K. military cohort. This included three random samples of U.K. military personnel, covering those who had taken part in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, those deployed to former Yugoslavia (FY) beginning in 1992, and those in the Armed Forces in 1992 who had not deployed on either operation. Details of the original study can be found elsewhere.[11] The peacekeeping questionnaire asked questions about (1) training for those being deployed on future missions, (2) whether formal psychological briefing following return from peacekeeping operations was necessary, (3) whether peacekeeping experiences had changed the soldier, and (4) whether peacekeeping experiences had changed attitudes about the future in the military.

The overall response rate was 71%, and 1,202 (51%) reported being deployed on one or more peacekeeping operations. Details of this group are reported elsewhere.[12] From this group of 1,202, we randomly selected 342 questionnaires to explore the qualitative findings of the study.

Data were grouped and analyzed thematically by using a model of cross-case text analysis. A constant comparative method allowed us to continually compare responses within the data in terms of similarities and differences. Categories emerged throughout the analysis process. Researchers then considered possible meanings and how these fit with developing themes. Where differences existed, consensus agreements were achieved between the researchers.

Results

General Characteristics

The general characteristics of the cohort are presented in Table I. The majority of peacekeepers were male (249 respon-

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TABLE I

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

	No. (%)
Gender	
Male	289 (85)
Female	53 (16)
Area of peacekeeping operation[a]	
Bosnia	400 (68)
Kosovo	71 (12)
Cyprus	66 (11)
Northern Iraq	13 (2)
Other	36 (6)
Total	586 (100)
Number of peacekeeping operations	
1	178 (52)
2	109 (32)
≥3	55 (16)

Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole numbers.
[a]Not mutually exclusive.

dents, 86%), with a mean age of 38 years (SD, 6.8 years; range, 27–60 years). The majority (287 respondents, 84%) had undertaken at least two peacekeeping operations during the study period, with a total of 586 peacekeeping operations overall. The vast majority of peacekeeping operations were to FY (471 operations, 80%).

Experiences of Peacekeeping

The first stage of analysis aimed to identify perceived causes of stress experienced by peacekeepers during deployment. The 10 most common responses are presented in Table II. Participants' narratives built up a picture of peacekeepers' experiences during deployment.

Exposure to Stressful Events

The majority of peacekeepers reported being exposed to at least one stressful event during their deployment. Events included passing through areas where there was a danger of minefields (307 respondents, 90%), involvement in unofficial

negotiating (141 respondents, 41%), seeing dead or wounded civilians (206 respondents, 60%), experiencing confrontations at checkpoints (210 respondents, 61%), experiencing theft of personal property (163 respondents, 48%), involvement in official negotiating (122 respondents, 36%), seeing dead or wounded children (126 respondents, 37%), involvement in stressful and isolated situations where relief was not possible (114 respondents, 33%), and being caught in a firefight between local groups (80 respondents, 23%).

However, very few respondents (four respondents) stated that exposure to danger was a direct cause of stress, and all of these cases were related to the danger of road mines (four respondents). Instead, powerlessness (41 respondents, 12%), frustration with the rules of engagement (28 respondents, 8%), isolation (27 respondents, 8%), and boredom (21 respondents, 6%) were the most common "stressors" in peacekeepers' narratives. Nevertheless, 49 peacekeepers (14%) spoke about the positive impact that peacekeeping had had on their lives. The following section uses quotations to highlight some of the negative and positive aspects of the peacekeeping role.

Powerlessness, Frustration, Isolation, and Boredom

Feelings of powerlessness were connected to respondents' feelings of "inadequacy" and that "all the hard work and vast amounts of money are in vain." Ten respondents (3%) commented on their inability to provide direct assistance or support to civilians, in particular to children (six respondents).

> . . . the sight of many children whose parents had been murdered during the war. I felt guilty that I could not take them all back to England.

Frustration and stress were related to a combination of events and restrictions caused by the rules of engagement during deployment. Comments such as "our hands were tied," "it was extremely frustrating," "we were left emasculated," and "there were too many rules" indicate that troops felt undermined and "unable to do the job." Respondents expressed concerns about their inability to meet the needs of the local population and the restricting nature of the rules of engagement.

TABLE II

PEACEKEEPING STRESSORS

	No. (%)				
	All the Time	Frequently	Quite Often	Seldom	Never
Passed through areas with danger of minefields	61 (18)	84 (25)	100 (29)	62 (18)	35 (10)
Involved in unofficial negotiating	6 (2)	23 (7)	49 (14)	79 (23)	185 (54)
Seen dead or wounded adult civilians	10 (3)	24 (7)	51 (15)	121 (35)	136 (40)
Witnessed theft of NATO or UN property	4 (1)	13 (4)	48 (14)	98 (29)	179 (52)
Experienced confrontations at checkpoints	13 (4)	38 (11)	48 (14)	111 (32)	132 (39)
Experienced theft of personal property	3 (0[a])	10 (3)	47 (14)	103 (30)	179 (52)
Involved in official negotiating	9 (3)	24 (7)	27 (8)	62 (18)	220 (64)
Seen dead or wounded children	6 (2)	17 (5)	28 (8)	75 (22)	216 (63)
Stressful/isolated situations when relief was not possible	4 (1)	8 (2)	34 (10)	93 (27)	203 (59)
Caught in firefight between local groups	1 (0[a])	16 (5)	26 (8)	71 (21)	228 (67)

Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole numbers.
[a]Less than 1%.

Some respondents were left wondering about the relevance of humanitarian operations and their role in the peacekeeping operation. In particular, they identified a mismatch in roles; soldiers trained to "fight and defend their country" were deployed, instead, as peacekeepers (10 respondents, 3%).

Twenty-seven peacekeepers (8%) spoke about the impact of isolation. Twenty-two of these (6%) described the negative impact of isolation from family members.

> What [peacekeeping] does not allow for is how mundane it can be for a soldier to be separated from his family.

Boredom was mentioned by 21 respondents (6%). The stress of boredom was directly related not to a lack of activities but rather to the routine nature of activities and the lack of opportunity to conduct professional activities. "Dealing with boredom" and "monotony" led to frustration, because experienced soldiers were unable to satisfy the professional requirements of soldiering, creating a feeling of an inability to be effective. For others, "long periods of inactivity," the "anticlimax" of peacekeeping, and "building up for events which never happened" created disillusionment and boredom and had a "detrimental effect on the troops."

Positive Impact of Experiences

Forty-nine respondents (14%) described the positive impact of peacekeeping on their own lives. The most common response was a greater appreciation for "things back home" (11 respondents, 3%). Respondents commented that they appreciated their lives, their children and families, their material possessions, people with different religion and beliefs, and their health.

> Seeing poor naked children made me appreciate mine a lot more.

Others stated that their experience had changed their attitudes toward other people, making them more "tolerant" (10 respondents, 3%), "respectful" (nine respondents, 3%), "understanding" (seven respondents, 2%), "mature" (three respondents), "humble" (three respondents), and "sensible" (two respondents).

> Before I went to Bosnia, I was young, single, and selfish. My experiences changed my life forever. Now I value my own life and I am respectful of the life of others. From being a gung-ho squaddie, I am now more into peace and love than I ever was. I was sent to Bosnia still ill from the Gulf, as many others were. It was a struggle, still is, but life is really important. . . .

Ten respondents (3%) stated that they had reconsidered their view of life, which had led them to revisit their own priorities in life.

> It has made me focus my life and put a lot of personal problems into perspective. I believe I am a better individual for it.

Eight respondents (2%) stated how lucky they were to live in the United Kingdom.

> Made me feel extremely fortunate in belonging to a tolerant, well-meaning, society.

> Going to Bosnia made me appreciate living in Bristol.

Three respondents said they were grateful for the ability to live in a "free country."

Training

A total of 390 suggestions about the types of training needed for those scheduled to be deployed on peacekeeping missions were put forward from 182 peacekeepers (53%). Overall, 41 (12%) thought that the training that was currently offered was sufficient.

Responses are grouped into eight categories, as shown in Table III. Sixty-two respondents (16%) stated that more training about the history, culture, and language of the country was needed for those deploying on future missions. Other recommendations for training included more in-depth training about day-to-day operations (including routines, rules, and restrictions) (39 respondents, 11%), specialized training for specific trades or technical professions (17 respondents, 5%), training to help peacekeepers deal with stress and trauma while on deployment (16 respondents, 5%), training on how to deal with civilians and factions within the population (11 respondents, 3%), training on how to engage in conflict negotiation (eight respondents, 2%), and a more-realistic use of role-playing exercises during training (eight respondents, 2%). Peacekeepers spoke about the critical interface between peacekeeping and conflict resolution, necessitating "more in-depth understanding of local problems to deal with problems," an understanding of "crowd control and coping with an angry mob while isolated," and a "clearer understanding of the history and issues involved in the conflict, with appropriate negotiation skills."

Debriefing

Nearly one-half of all respondents (165 respondents, 48%) stated that they were in favor of a formal psychological debriefing on return from operations (Table IV). Similar numbers of

TABLE III
PERCEIVED TRAINING/DEBRIEFING NEEDS

	No. (%)
Training required	
History/background/language	62 (16)
Day-to-day operations	39 (10)
Trade/technical	17 (4)
Stress/trauma	16 (4)
Civilians	11 (3)
Conflict negotiation	8 (2)
Command structures	7 (2)
Role plays	8 (2)
Training sufficient	41 (11)
Other	21 (5)
No response	160 (41)
Total	390 (100)
Debriefing[a]	
Compulsory for all	80 (23)
Conditional	85 (25)
Not needed	27 (8)
Other	17 (5)
No response	133 (39)
Total	342 (100)

Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole numbers.
[a]Not mutually exclusive.

TABLE IV

ATTITUDES TOWARD FORMAL PSYCHOLOGICAL DEBRIEFING

	No. (%)
Debriefing	
Yes	165 (48)
No	27 (8)
Other	17 (5)
Not recorded	134 (39)
Types of debriefing	
Informal	27 (8)
Individual	17 (5)
Group	11 (3)
Confidential	14 (4)

Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole numbers.

participants stated that debriefing should be compulsory (85 respondents, 25%), compared with those who stated it should be available only if requested (80 respondents, 24%). Twenty-seven respondents (8%) stated that debriefing should not be used, because stigma may be attached to those seeking psychological debriefing. Ten respondents commented that it would be seen as a "sign of weakness." A number of respondents stated that the most important aspect of psychological debriefing was that it was individual (17 respondents, 5%) and confidential (14 respondents, 4%).

The Future

Finally, we investigated whether peacekeeping had changed the individual's decision about a future in the military. Forty-five (13%) reported that they had resigned or retired from service as a consequence of their peacekeeping mission. The reasons for this were not given.

Limitations

The study was undertaken in 2001 and examined peacekeeping operations back to 1991. Therefore, the results may be subject to recall bias. Views before deployment were not examined. There may be a mismatch between predeployment activities and the reporting of these activities after deployment. In addition, because of other research being conducted with the sample, the cohort of peacekeepers was composed with over-sampling those reporting fatigue. However, there is no reason that fatigue should have influenced the recollection of events. Low response rates for some questions mean that, at times, results should be taken as exploratory. The findings presented in this study are relevant to peacekeepers from the United Kingdom and may not be pertinent to peacekeepers from other armed forces.

Discussion

There has been discussion elsewhere about the possible conflict between traditional military roles and the new responsibilities of peacekeeping operations.[13] Peacekeepers' perceptions about their experiences during peacekeeping operations vary immensely.[14] This is the first article that addresses the issue from a U.K. perspective.

As expected, given the nature of deployment to FY, particularly in the period before the Dayton Agreement (the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina), most peacekeepers experienced at least one stressor during their peacekeeping operation. However, a principle finding is that, although such events were common, they were not a major cause of perceived stress. In contrast, professional issues such as powerlessness, frustration with the rules of engagement, isolation, and boredom were the most common stressors in peacekeepers' narratives. Boredom was mostly linked to professional lack of activity. This was different from other reports[3] that suggested that boredom is caused by a general lack of activity. However, there was an additional element of frustration that appeared to be caused by the restrictions of the rules of engagement.

Peacekeepers appeared to be looking for training that would help them maintain impartiality in often-volatile situations. Given the political imperative that prevented peacekeepers from using force, it should not be surprising that most training recommendations were about local culture, languages, the history of the region and factions, and conflict negotiation.

The role, if any, of formal or mandatory debriefing remains uncertain. Peacekeepers' perceptions of debriefing show that, although many are in favor of formal psychological debriefings, there is still concern about the stigmatizing consequences of these debriefings. There were marked differences in the types of debriefing that peacekeepers thought would be useful. Other research showed that most U.K. peacekeepers appear to benefit from making use of informal social networks (such as friends and peers), rather than any formal debriefing service.[15] Therefore, a "one size fits all" approach to debriefing does not appear to be supported. Rather, as others have suggested, more-tailored approaches, particularly for high-risk groups, may be more useful.[16]

Given the complexities of peacekeepers' experiences and societal understanding of them, there is a need for further qualitative studies. It is important that, where possible, predeployment attitudes are investigated.

Conclusions

Peacekeepers' perceptions of what would be supportive before and on return from peacekeeping operations vary immensely. From this study, we may draw three main conclusions. (1) Most peacekeepers stated that they experienced at least one dangerous event during their peacekeeping operation, but the events were not perceived as a major cause of stress. (2) Many peacekeepers found the role fulfilling. (3) Most peacekeepers perceived that stress came from frustrations with the occupational role of being a peacekeeper.

This final conclusion may be mitigated in some cases by training. Increased training regarding conflict negotiation and indigenous culture may help to offset some of the frustrations linked to rules of engagement. A series of measures may need to be implemented to help trained soldiers cope with the social and political demands of the rules of engagement during peacekeeping operations. Additional training, identifying and exploring the potential conflicts between the traditional role of the soldier and the role of the peacekeeper, may be useful. However, it is also important to recognize that stress is not caused only by deployment experiences but may be caused by a range of sociological and cultural issues associated with military life. Finally, there is

continuing uncertainty about the usefulness of debriefing. The evidence in favor of debriefing is conspicuously absent,[17,18] and the military has ceased to offer it. However, peacekeepers perceive that psychological needs are not being met. Matching service personnel expectations with the desire to be seen as supportive (while providing an intervention that may do more harm than good) remains a challenge for the U.K. Armed Forces.

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