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## **STRESS IN SOLDIERS IN STABILISATION OPERATIONS AND SUPPORT PEACE BEYOND COUNTRY BORDERS**

### Abstract

This article is devoted to the stress experienced by soldiers serving abroad. The first part of the article discusses stress as a social phenomenon followed by a presentation of the history of combat stress over the centuries and ways of understanding it. The terminology of stress and combat stress is presented in different approaches. In the second part, the terminology of war stressors, i.e. stressors that can occur on missions abroad, is presented. The final section divides stressors into physical, cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual stressors and briefly characterises them<sup>1</sup>.

**Keywords:** stress, stabilisation operations, operation, war

### Introduction

There are situations in people's lives that are considered difficult and stressful. Assessment of the intensity of these difficulties is subjective and there are different patterns of coping with such situations. It is therefore necessary to adopt specific criteria that provide some basis for their objectification. An initial, important step in this direction is to distinguish between levels of stress intensity. The highest levels of stress intensity occur when dealing with trauma or situations described as extreme. The concept of trauma or extreme situations appears in classifications of mental disorders. Trauma and extreme situations include, for example, a serious threat to one's own or another person's life or physical integrity. An extreme situation is also triggered by events (either short- or long-term) of an extremely frightening nature. This could be a natural or man-made disaster, involvement in

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warfare, a serious accident, witnessing the cruelty and death of others or being a victim of torture, assault, rape or other similar event. The set of events included in the concept of trauma or extreme situation is quite broad. However, all such events have the characteristics of something that rubs against or even exceeds the limits of human endurance to stress. The events can be mass, individual, sudden lasting a relatively short period of time, or stretched over several years. In 1967, psychiatrists at Washington University in Seattle, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, declared an alternative concept of stress, based on the term of a stressor, namely an internal or external event or stimulus that causes stress. Holmes and Rahe developed a scale of 43 life events, which volunteers ranked according to how much adaptation each event required<sup>2</sup>.

While serving in Military Contingents abroad, soldiers are exposed to numerous stressing factors (so-called stressors), which have a significant impact on their psycho-physical condition and thus their operational capabilities. The problem of combat stress, its following elements or difficulties in adaptation in society after returning from a mission is a very important issue for soldiers, their families and also society. Therefore some veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. It is crucial to mention how the difficulties of military missions affect soldiers' operational capabilities, what factors generate stress in this environment and how stress-reducing mechanisms function. Military service bears lots of hardships that affect the character and behaviour of the soldier<sup>3</sup>.

### **Stress and combat stress**

The history of combat stress dates back to the early days of armed conflict between humans. In those remote times, it was considered as a normal and necessary part of the battlefield. The ancient Greek poet Homer wrote about the effects of warfare in the 8th century BC. In his work entitled *The Iliad* he depicted Achilles, who was devastated by his losses during the Trojan War. In the epic *Odyssey*, the author described the psychological journey of a veteran of the mentioned war named Odysseus. He experienced recurrent images of traumatic scenes on waking, (so-called Flashbacks), as well as the syndrome contemporarily known as 'survivor's guilt'<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> B. Borys, *Extreme situations and their impact on human mental state*, Gdańsk 2004, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> I. Tomaszewska, *Stres służby wojskowej - wybrane zagadnienia*, Warszawa 2004, pp. 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> T. Kucmin [et al.], *History of trauma and posttraumatic disorders in literature*, Lublin 2016, p. 272.

Holy Bible can also provide passages depicting disorders following traumatic events. The *Book of Job* is a good example. It shows the fate and suffering of a man who lost his entire family and possessions. This caused him to feel powerless in the face of recurring nightmares representing the misfortunes that befell him. The story also shows how strong a person's resilience can be in the face of such trauma. Due to strong faith and prayer, Job regained all that he had lost.

The 16th century treatise *On the art of war* by Niccolo Machiavelli presents war as a necessity, but also notices the negative consequences it has on the fighting soldiers. This can be seen in the passage: "who could love peace more than he who can only suffer in war?"<sup>5</sup>

J.M. Da Costa, a former Civil War military psychiatrist, described a condition known as 'overactive heart' in 1871. The condition was known as cardiac neurosis, neurocirculatory asthenia, nervous heart and soldier's heart. Its characteristic features were shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, diarrhoea, dull chest pain, as well as persistent tachycardia during minor exertion. Da Costa also noted that the health of many soldiers improved significantly after they were withdrawn from the front line and given time to rest. "Hyperactive heart" is very similar to the term "panic anxiety" used by modern psychiatrists and psychologists.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was introduced into the DSM (Disorder Diagnosis Qualification System) in 1980 by the American Psychological Association. The term was introduced as a result of numerous clinical observations and research findings based on Vietnam War veterans and Holocaust survivors. Vietnam left a particular mark on American society and the US military. The brutality of this war meant that soldiers returning home very often struggled with psychological problems. This was the impetus for researchers to investigate thoroughly the phenomenon of combat stress and the trauma caused by it<sup>6</sup>.

The reactions of soldiers throughout history to stressful events in combat and combat operations have been very similar. What has changed is the way they are understood and classified. Today, there are many programmes to detect and help combat PTSD in veterans returning from missions. Today, no one calls them cowards anymore, as the problem of disorders resulting from traumatic experiences in war is widespread<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> A. Piotrowski, *Psychosocial consequences of operational-combat stress*, "Science books WSOWL", 2012, No. 2, p. 131.

<sup>6</sup> E.T. Dean, *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War*. Cambridge 1997.

<sup>7</sup> A. Piotrowski, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

The concept of stress first appeared in the scientific literature in the 1950s introduced by a Hungarian endocrinologist Hans Selye. He is the author of a physiological theory of stress, the essence of which is the concept of General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). Selye's research led him to conclude that, under the influence of various noxious stimuli, the body reacts in a stimulus-specific but also in a non-specific manner, regardless of the type of stimulus. According to Selye, the General Adaptation Syndrome consists of 3 phases: alarm study (mobilisation to meet and resist the stress), resilience (resisting the stress) and exhaustion (if the resistance offered does not combat the stressor then the coping mechanism is exhausted)<sup>8</sup>.

There have been some critical reactions to Selye's concept. According to Mason, individual differences in emotional reactions resulting from stress are probably due to psychological stress preceding the physiological reaction and different awareness of the existence of harmful factors and attempts to cope with them. Mason proved in his research that high temperature does not induce activity on the thyroid gland if the psychological factors related to the perception and feeling of the stressor are eliminated. This research confirmed the importance of the psychological factor in the stress response.

The psychological view of stress used three definitions of it: as a stimulus, as an internal human reaction and the relationship between the elements mentioned. The theories of Holmes, Pahné (concept of life changes) and Mechanic, among others, gave rise to modern understanding of stress as a reaction between internal and external factors. Internationally, the phenomenological-cognitive concept of Lazarus and Folkman and Hobfoll's Conservation Of Resources theory (COR) gained prominence. According to Lazarus and Folkman, stress is: "a specific relationship between a person and his or her environment that is judged by the person to be taxing or exceeding his or her resources and threatening his or her well-being". Hobfoll's concept, on the other hand, assumes that the purpose of human activity is to seek, obtain and protect valued objects called resources. A stressful situation arises when there is a "threat of net loss of resources, net loss of resources, no increase in resources once invested". Stress can be experienced as a result of both a subjective assessment of loss and an objective loss of resources. Hobfoll lists four types of resources: objects, conditions, personal resources and energy resources<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> A. Kaczmarska, P. Curyło-Sikora, *Problems of stress - a review of concepts*, "Hygeia Public Health". 2016, No. 4, pp. 317-321.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 317-321.

Military stressors compared to civilian life are extremely strong and chronic. Indeed, they contribute to numerous stress injuries caused mainly by participation in combat and military operations abroad (so-called dislocation stressors).

Combat and Operational Stress (COSR), according to The American Institute Of Stress - a US-based non-profit organisation that has been studying combat stress issues since 1968 - can be defined as: "the sum total of the physical and emotional stressors experienced by soldiers and civilian personnel as a result of combat operations or being in an operational zone". At the beginning of the 21st century it was determined that stress in the context of military and civilian personnel in combat and at the operational level is an integral part of warfare. Therefore it is natural to this environment.

Combat stress can be considered on various levels. It represents a challenge for soldiers and commanders to overcome, but it is also a weapon which they can significantly affect the morale of the enemy<sup>10</sup>. Soldiers also approach battlefield stress as a test of personal competence. As can be seen, it plays very different roles during military operations<sup>11</sup>.

### a) Combat stress as a weapon

Military commanders are aware of the fact that the human factor determines the outcome of a clash on the battlefield. War should be understood as a clash of opposing human aspirations, driven by emotions. Its outcome is influenced not only by technology and material means but also by psychological and moral forces. Thus, often the key to victory is not so much the physical destruction of the opponent's forces and resources, but breaking down his fighting spirit.

As stressors play a very important role on the battlefield, it is natural for the military to deliberately develop strategies and methods to induce mental, physical and emotional stress in the enemy. A recent development in the use of stress as a weapon is the concept of PSYOPS (Psychological Operations). The aim of psychological operations is to influence the emotions, motives, reasoning and behaviour of the enemy and his government in a way that weakens their will to continue fighting<sup>12</sup>. The

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<sup>10</sup> B. Kruszyński, *Combat stress in the context of counterinsurgency operations by US forces in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan*, "Zeszyty Naukowe UJ", 2014, No. 4, pp. 925-934.

<sup>11</sup> *Combat Stress* (MCRP 6-11C) Washington DC 2010..

<sup>12</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *Combat stress Theories, research, prevention and therapy*, Warsaw 2010, pp 17-18.

means used for this purpose include leaflets, radio, television, social media and even simple field megaphones. Psychological operations are linked directly to combat operations in order to increase the power to influence the enemy troops<sup>13</sup>.

### **b) Combat stress as a friction to be overcome**

The Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz, a brilliant 19th century strategist, used the term 'friction' to describe combat stress. The US Marine Corps uses the term in doctrinal publications, thus emphasising the inseparability of stress from war, while portraying it as a hindrance. The soldier's ethos states that a soldier's honour is to win in battle. It is a way of discharging their duties to the nation, the homeland, but also to comrades-in-arms, commanders and their honour<sup>14</sup>.

A very important feature, whose successful handling of friction depends on, is courage. It can be defined as self-confidence in combat, which depends on confidence in oneself, one's skills and equipment, but above all in one's colleagues and commanders. Courage is also willpower. The will to continue fighting is closely linked to the confidence that one is able to continue the combat. Also crucial is self-belief in being able to hold out a little longer, which can be undermined by the realisation of one's own suffering, discomfort and insecurity. This is why it is so important in overcoming friction not to think about stressors and one's reactions to them, but to focus on the task<sup>15</sup>.

### **c) Combat stress as a challenge for the command**

When a stress or friction arises in the minds of commanders that needs to be overcome or ignored, they begin to see it as a challenge to their leadership abilities. The problem of dealing with combat and operational stress lies with commanders for two reasons.

Firstly, the troop's morale, will to fight and self-confidence depend on the soldiers' personal relationship with their superiors. Commanders are tasked with motivating troops properly, increasing their ability to function effectively and overcome the stressors affecting them in order to achieve their intended combat tasks. Secondly, commanders are responsible for their decisions on when and how to use the war resources entrusted to them by the nation, the most precious of which are the health and lives of soldiers.

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<sup>13</sup> G.L. Belenky, *Military psychiatry in the Israeli Defense Force*, [in:] *Military Psychiatry: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. R.A. Gabriel, New York 1969.

<sup>14</sup> C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, New York 2010.

<sup>15</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, pp. 18-20.

As loss of lives cannot be completely avoided, it is incumbent on commanders to ensure that each casualty contributes significantly to the achievement of the intended objective. As a consequence of the presence of signs of stress among soldiers in the unit, commanders may feel guilty about such a situation. Furthermore, senior leaders may blame lower-level commanders for the failure of their command<sup>16</sup>. This attitude leads leaders to perceive combat stress rather negatively. It also leads them to avoid recognising stress problems when they occur. The best and experienced commanders are able to distinguish which combat stress reactions should be considered a command problem and which are stress injuries<sup>17</sup>.

#### **d) Combat stress as a test of personal competence**

War can be seen as a test of masculinity and a ritual of initiation in men in many cultures. War is certainly not the only way to prove one's strength and courage, but it is undoubtedly the most difficult challenge a man can experience. On the other hand, soldiers who consciously put themselves to the test on the battlefield may purposely add unnecessary stressors to make the challenge more difficult for themselves. Such an approach is self-destructive<sup>18</sup>.

Another consequence of soldiers' perception of war as a test of their strength, courage and competence may be a sense of failure when they admit to combat stress symptoms. Therefore, there is a perception in their minds that stress symptoms are evidence of their weakness or incompetence. The invisibility of stress injuries is also a problem. This makes it difficult for soldiers to forgive themselves for the appearance of symptoms of mentioned injuries. It is difficult to accept the symptoms of combat stress without feeling that they have failed the test of war<sup>19</sup>.

### **Stressors of war (wars)**

War stressors can be defined as the physical and psychological challenges faced by people engaged in combat. They vary in many ways, including intensity and duration. The most destructive stressors are the strongest, most shocking ones, which include the sight of death, or the fear of losing one's life. Dislocation stressors, i.e. those dealing with

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> C.H. Cash, *A Table in the Presence*, Nashville, 2004; *The U.S. Army Leadership Field Manual: Be, Know, Do* (FM 22-100). New York 2004.

<sup>18</sup> *U.S. Army Combat Stress Control Handbook*. Guilford 2003.

<sup>19</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

operations overseas, are not in themselves so strong, but when acting from day to day over a prolonged period they can have a significant impact on soldiers' mental and physical functioning until the endurance limit is exceeded. This can be exceeded by even a seemingly trivial event, such as bad news from home, a minor illness or a conflict with a colleague or commander. However, it is only the total sum of all stressors acting over an extended period of time that leads to injury.

Stressors can be divided into different categories. The types of stressors affecting soldiers during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom will be shown<sup>20</sup>.

### a) Physical stressors

#### Hot and cold

Temperatures in the Middle East can reach up to 50°C and drop below freezing in winter. The effects of such high temperatures are compounded by the soldiers' protective clothing, consisting of a Kevlar helmet and bulletproof vest, which must be worn outside fortified buildings during missions. Although it provides a certain sense of security, as it has more than once saved soldiers from greater injury or even death, it also causes a significant increase in the felt temperature. Another nuisance are military vehicles, which most lack air conditioning, are cramped, stuffy and their windows are often closed to protect passengers from shrapnel. Low temperatures experienced in winter are also problematic, perhaps not as drastic as the heat, but soldiers posted at observation posts for extended periods can find them very stressful and annoying<sup>21</sup>.

#### Dehydration and dampness

Soldiers who are not adapted to climatic conditions that are new to them strongly feel their effects on themselves through, among other things, high water loss due to high temperatures and sweating. Dehydration, even to a slight degree, increases the resting heart rate and makes any physical or mental effort a challenge. Thirst is not a sufficient indicator of threatening dehydration, as soldiers quickly become insensitive to it. The consequences of dehydration can be death. Humidity can also be a mental and physical stressor. In summer, uniforms remain soaked in sweat for hours, while in winter, heavy rains can cause hypothermia when soldiers are often forced to stay out in the open area for long time<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>22</sup> B. Borys, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

### Dirt and mud

The dust that covers the desert is particularly troublesome for the military fighting and operating there. In winter, it hangs in the air for days during so-called Brown-outs, making visibility significantly impaired, breathing difficult and hygiene impossible. Heavy rains in winter transform the dust-covered terrain into a sea of thick, brown mud, often reaching above the ankles, which of course makes it difficult to move around, which under normal conditions would not be so challenging<sup>23</sup>.

### Sleep deprivation

Military operations are characterised by the fact that almost no soldier gets 6-8 hours of sleep. Soldiers fighting in the field must learn to sleep quickly and effectively, as they need to function by sleeping no more than four hours, and often much less. Lack of rest for long periods of time combined with the high physical exertion that occurs during combat can lead to visual hallucinations and difficulties with logical thinking. It is also important to note that fatigue and sleepiness are poor indicators of the need for sleep, as people adapt over time, feeling less sleepy and tired but unable to think clearly. There is scientific evidence that sleep is essential for recovery and to maintain physical and mental health. The more stress experienced by soldiers the more sleep they need to recover from the stress<sup>24</sup>.

### Noise and explosions

The whirring of engines, generators or even the singing of Arabs can be a source of irritation and interfere with concentration. No military camp or base protects soldiers from indirect fire from mortars, rockets and sometimes even from sniper fire from small arms. Howitzer batteries conducting counterfire are close enough to cause explosions and shocks comparable to those caused by mortar shells falling close by. The force of the firing causes the kind of bang that can shake a man to his core and overtax his courage. Some of the sounds once heard by soldiers can become powerful stress-inducing stimuli, such as the explosion of a booby-trapped mine or the firing of mortars at the position where the certain soldier was stationed. Sounds that are particularly memorable to soldiers are those made by dying people or animals, they are among some of the most powerful stressors<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> B. Kruszyński, *op.cit.*, pp. 925-934.

<sup>24</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>25</sup> A. Piotrowski, *op.cit.*, pp. 135-136.

### Fumes and odours

Military bases are not characterised by nice smells. The stench of human excrement hovers around portable toilets, while in less established areas human excrement is burnt daily in barrels of diesel fuel. The stench of burning rubbish, which is also particularly toxic, is also very annoying. However, the smells that have the greatest impact on the psyche of soldiers are those directly related to combat, i.e. the smell of blood, viscera and burnt flesh<sup>26</sup>.

### Bright light or darkness

The strong sun in Middle Eastern countries requires adaptation and can cause burns. The flashes of light preceding the shock, the bang and the hail of shrapnel following the explosion of an improvised explosive device (IED) in close proximity have a strong impact on soldiers' psyches, making them sensitive to them. However, greater stress among soldiers is caused by darkness. During night convoys and patrols, the vehicles' headlights are not switched on so as not to be an easy target and to avoid blinding their own gunners using infrared night vision goggles. Driving such a vehicle at night is dangerous, as evidenced by the number of fatalities in such patrols. Darkness also enlarges the fears experienced by soldiers<sup>27</sup>.

### Illness or injury

Missions lasting from a few to several months carry the risk of soldiers contracting various diseases such as seasonal viral upper respiratory infections. Physical injuries at war are common, and the number of wounded in relation to the dead is always several times or even several times higher. A large number of injuries and trauma are minor, such as lacerations or perforations of the eardrum caused by an IED or mortar shell explosion. The more severe the injury, the longer the recovery period and the stress burden on the injured person. It is important to note that it is impossible to evacuate every wounded person from a theatre of war. The evacuation of the slightly wounded would reflect badly on those soldiers who have come round without injury, but it would also place the burden of shame and guilt on wounded soldiers forced to abandon their comrades-in-arms. For this reason, in most cases the wounded themselves want to return to their units<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> A. Kaczmarska, P. Curyło-Sikora, *op.cit.*, pp. 317-319.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 320.

<sup>28</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

## **b) Cognitive stressors**

### Lack or excess of information

Uncertainty about the way forward increases the stress burden on any ordinary soldier. Most information on strategic and tactical operations never makes it far down the military hierarchy, except for soldiers who need to know the details of the task assigned to them. Due to the lack of reliable information, rumours are spread among soldiers to fill this void. Soldiers stationed at Iraq's most forward bases often heard gunfire just outside the base area during the day and night, but did not know what was happening or whether their camp was safe anymore until they read about it later on the Internet. Also, too much of bad information can have a stressful effect, especially when it is a serious problem related to the theatre of operations, or loved ones left behind in the country<sup>29</sup>.

### Ambiguous or changing task or role

Taking the example of the US Army's operations in Iraq, the changing role of soldiers can be seen. War actions in the country ended on 30 April 2003. They were treated as liberators by the local population, so the soldiers felt a certain freedom of movement and greater psychological comfort. Further troops to be dislocated in Iraq were being prepared for Operation Iraqi Freedom II, which was intended to be a peacekeeping mission (Stability and Support Operations). US and coalition troops fell into traps while delivering food, medicine, money or other aid. There were also executions of public figures collaborating with the 'American occupier'. Reconstructed administration buildings were soon destroyed by the Mujahideen. Precisely for these reasons, it was difficult for soldiers to reconcile peacekeeping missions with constant attacks and the duty to destroy and kill the enemy<sup>30</sup>.

### The changing rules of engagement

Another stressor is the rules of engagement, i.e. the norms that determine when soldiers are allowed to open fire with their weapons and to whom. Over the course of the operation, these have restricted US and coalition troops so much that they could only use so-called deadly force (lethal force) in case of a clear and imminent threat to the life of a coalition soldier or civilian from an unquestionably armed attacker. A common problem was also that civilians were too close to the combatants

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>30</sup> *U.S. Army Combat...*

making it difficult for soldiers to identify who among them was an enemy combatant. American soldiers, as their own losses increased, began to understand that when making contact they had to shoot first and ask questions later. Anyone who was in the area from where they were attacked had to be treated as an enemy<sup>31</sup>.

#### Conflict of loyalties

Soldiers sent on a mission to a war zone leave their relatives, families and friends in the country. There can be a conflict of loyalties because of this, as on the one hand they have to be loyal to their comrades in arms and their homeland, and on the other hand to their loved ones left behind. The biggest problem occurs when there are serious problems with family or friends, e.g. illness, accident or death. Such situations particularly affect soldiers, as they feel helpless and are more sensitive to their own level of security<sup>32</sup>.

#### Boredom and monotony

Most of the time on peacekeeping and stabilisation missions involves doing the same tasks, such as standing guard at observation posts, sentry posts, and watchtowers for long hours, often for days in a row. Gunners and support personnel ride in convoys looking for threats such as booby-trapped mines or SVBIEDs (Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices, - an improvised explosive device carried in a suicide vehicle) for many kilometres. On the other hand, less tedious tasks include foot patrols and combing operations in urban neighbourhoods. These are aimed at catching Mujahideen and their sympathisers, as well as finding secret weapons caches. Such operations are called "Cordon and schock". All this monotony and fatigue can lead to dullness, cause disorientation or discouragement, and lack of motivation<sup>33</sup>.

#### Experiences that seem meaningless

War and its associated experiences have a significant impact on soldiers' value systems. They particularly affect the young ones on their first mission, as they have an unrealistic belief in the division between good and evil, in their immortality or importance. Unfortunately, missions in war zones very often verify this through difficult, destructive and ambiguous situations. Of course, the impact of such situations on

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<sup>31</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 30.

soldiers can have a positive effect, i.e. it can accelerate the process of emotional maturation, and successes on the battlefield, although drastic, have a positive effect on self-esteem and self-confidence<sup>34</sup>.

### **c) Emotional stressors**

#### Loss of friends due to death or injury

Johnatan Shay, in his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, stated that the bond that is formed between comrades-in-arms is, in its nature and intensity, closer to that between mother and child and that between ordinary friends. Soldiers who endure the hardships of warfare together, spending every moment together on a mission, feel an unusually high degree of closeness, trust and responsibility for the life and death of comrades. The shock and reaction to the death of a fellow soldier is therefore comparable to that experienced by a mother who has lost a child. This is accompanied by a whole range of emotions, shock, disbelief, fear, shame, anger and longing. They cannot afford to despair when they are constantly operating under the threat of their own lives<sup>35</sup>.

#### Fear

When asked what they fear most during combat operations, the vast majority of soldiers answer that death, disability or loss of comrades-in-arms. Fear of threats to the physical safety of the soldier is a constant feature of combat operations. Particularly stressful and accumulating fear are the conditions of war during combat with insurgents, where there is no classic front line and any civilian can turn out to be an attacker. Soldiers would not perform heroic acts, they would not run towards the danger instead of fleeing. So you can see that it is not the fear of injury or death that is the greatest, but the shame and sense of defeat that is inseparable from defeat. A soldier's honour is to win in battle, thus most soldiers fear that they will at the most important moment they let themselves, their comrades and their commanders down. The vision of losing honour is worse than losing one's life<sup>36</sup>.

#### Shame and guilt

So-called 'survival guilt', i.e. guilt over staying alive, is very common among soldiers whose colleagues have fallen in battle. They ask

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> D. Grossman, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and Peace*. St. Louis 2004.

<sup>36</sup> R.R. Grinker, J.P. Spiegel. *Men Under Stress*. Philadelphia 1945.

themselves "why not me?". It is hard for them to cope with this, but at least they are able to realise it. The situation is different when it comes to feeling guilty about killing enemies, especially unarmed men, women and children. Such situations cause shame and making sure about that becomes very stressful. Intense guilt often manifests itself in nightmares and daytime fantasies that are self-destructive in nature. Another issue is the unconscious shame of having failed. It is often pushed out of consciousness through a silent pact between soldiers. Hence they avoid talking about guilt-inducing events<sup>37</sup>.

### Helplessness

A sense of being in control of the situation and of oneself are the basis of self-confidence. Being in control of the situation makes soldiers sure and makes it less dangerous and chaotic. The greater the chaos and danger, the greater the need to exercise control. For this reason, soldiers prefer to be active and act rather than be passive and helpless. They prefer to attack rather than defend themselves. Unfortunately, one of the characteristics of modern conflicts is their asymmetric nature. This results in several elements of warfare that US and coalition troops have to deal with, which create a sense of helplessness and passivity.

Infrequent indirect-fire mortar and rocket fire is often unpredictable, and the enemies carrying it out usually manage to flee to their homes before the military can catch them. The result is a sense of helplessness and powerlessness<sup>38</sup>.

### The horror of the massacre

In order to maintain a healthy mental state, soldiers often have the belief that they are relatively safe and unreachable by the enemy. It is hard for them to become aware of their own mortality. It usually arises through experiencing a stressful trauma. One such stressful experience, which makes soldiers realise the fragility of life, is being witness to a massacre. The sight of dead or shredded people, especially comrades-in-arms or commanders, greatly affects soldiers' own sense of vulnerability. In counter-insurgency fighting in particular, soldiers are vulnerable to attack at any time<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> D. Grossman, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> B. Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2001.

<sup>39</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

## Killing

In his books *On killing' and 'On combat*, David Grossman proved that killing people can be a difficult and traumatic experience for many soldiers. The author states that every human being has a natural aversion to killing people, which soldiers must overcome on the battlefield in order to be able to commit aggression directed at the enemy<sup>40</sup>.

### d) Social stressors

#### Isolation from social support

Soldiers experience separation from family and home to varying degrees when dislocated to a mission area. Certainly, older, experienced soldiers are better adapted to such a situation after several missions. They are used to being away from home and are more intimate with their comrades-in-arms. On the other hand, young soldiers on their first mission often feel lonely and longing. The means of communication itself can also be a problem. Some soldiers are not able to communicate well by telephone, letter or internet<sup>41</sup>.

#### Lack of privacy

While soldiers are separated from their families, during a mission they are forced to be among comrades-in-arms all the time, from whom they cannot isolate themselves. Obviously, such a situation has many positive features, since the awareness of being next to colleagues and commanders, whom one trusts and sometimes knows better than one's family, creates a greater sense of security and allows one to forget the fear of combat. On the other hand, sharing all the rooms and all the spare time with comrades-in-arms means a total lack of privacy. Often a soldier's only individual belongings are small mementos like a family photo, uniform and weapons, while the rest is to some extent shared<sup>42</sup>.

#### Media and public opinion

What remains incomprehensible to many civilians is the motivation of volunteers who volunteer for military service and willingly fight, suffer and sacrifice their lives in war. One of the strongest motivations is love to the homeland. God, honour and fatherland are not just vague slogans but are highly valued by the military, especially when the high-

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<sup>40</sup> D. Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Boston 1995.

<sup>41</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 34.

est sacrifices are required from them. Today in the USA, the public is more in favour of operations in Afghanistan or Iraq. However, any criticism of the war being waged or the way it is being conducted still inflicts great emotional wounds on soldiers who risk their own lives or have lost close friends in the war. This is why the nation's support for veterans of operations abroad is so important<sup>43</sup>.

### **e) Spiritual stressors**

#### Loss of faith in God

The chaos, lack of sense and brutality of war can undermine the moral and spiritual beliefs of soldiers. Some of them find it hard to continue to believe in a good and loving God after a traumatic experience. Sometimes they cannot forgive God for allowing the evils of war. However, it goes the other way round. Soldiers find solace and peace in their faith, its renewal and deepening. Military chaplains, who go on missions with the soldiers, take care of their spiritual life. It is they who bear much of the moral responsibility for spiritual health and the sense that 'our' actions are the good and right ones<sup>44</sup>.

#### Inability to forgive

A major challenge for soldiers is to forgive themselves and others for their weaknesses and faults, which war clearly highlights. Often soldiers are forced by circumstances and the situation during combat to do things they later deeply regret. They return from missions disappointed and let down by themselves or those they trusted. The result on returning home can be aggression, alienation or a tendency to fall into addictions<sup>45</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The Armed Forces are an essential element of the state's security system, but it is not the equipment but the human resources that testify to the army's strength. The participation of soldiers in missions abroad is a test of physical and mental endurance and an incredible challenge. Trust to the commander as an authority results in an increased sense of security among soldiers and a closer relationship between them. Awareness of the stressors present in a military operations zone and training the

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<sup>43</sup> D. Grossman, *On Killing...*

<sup>44</sup> C. Figley, W. Nash, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

ways to cope with them can effectively reduce the impact of their effects. Social support from family, friends and psychological support is very important after a stressful situation and prevents the distant consequences of post-traumatic stress. An extremely important aspect is the research for psychological trauma that may occur in soldiers returning home from missions, as a result of traumatic experiences and the hardships of service. A common problem is the readaptation of soldiers to previously fulfilled tasks. Adaptation to a peaceful life can take a long time.

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### Stres u żołnierzy podczas operacji stabilizacyjnych i wsparcia pokoju poza granicami kraju

#### Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest stresowi jaki towarzyszy żołnierzom pełniącym służbę poza granicami państwa. W pierwszej części artykułu omówiono stres jako zjawisko społeczne, a następnie przedstawiono historię stresu bojowego na przestrzeni wieków i sposoby jego rozumienia. Ukazano terminologię stresu oraz stresu bojowego w różnych ujęciach. W drugiej części zaprezentowano terminologię stresorów wojennych (wojny), czyli czynników powodujących stres, które mogą wystąpić na misjach poza granicami kraju. W końcowej części dokonano podziału stresorów na stresory fizyczne, poznawcze, społeczne, emocjonalne i duchowe oraz krótko je scharakteryzowano.

**Słowa kluczowe:** stres, operacja stabilizacyjna, operacja, wojna