

# Stress factors and positive aspects of deployment to international military operation

## Abstract

Participation in the International Military Operations (IMO) in a foreign country means separation from family, increased physical activities, changes of living and working habits, new duty of responsibilities and permanent tension. The purpose of this study was to explore stress factors encountered in peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, the nature of feelings across operational phases of deployment, and positive aspects of deployment. The data were collected with questionnaire constructed for this research. Research is conducted on a sample of 180 soldiers, three months post-deployment. Findings suggest that there are a wide range of stressors in the missions; most common are unfamiliar cultural and climate surrounding, possibility of hazardous illness, language barrier, separation from family and concerns about family welfare. Furthermore, degree of stress experienced during deployment is medium intensity. The results indicates that a nature of feelings varies across operational phases; excitement in the beginning of deployment, increased self-confidence and self-competence in the middle and feelings of happiness and proud at the end of deployment. Present study has shown that, although participation in international military operation is characterized with great deal of stress factors; many peacekeeper soldiers perceive lots of positive aspects. These results provide useful information and leads to recommendations for training and psychological preparation of soldiers preparing for deployment.

**Keywords:** international military operation, stress factors, stress intensity, positive aspects of deployment

Volume 1 Issue 7 - 2014

**Valentina Rickovic**

Military Psychologist, Croatian Armed Forces, Croatia

**Correspondence:** Valentina Rickovic, Military Psychologist, Croatian Armed Forces, A umski put 26 10000 Zagreb Croatia, Tel 00385-91-6004212, Email valentine.rickovic@gmail.com

**Received:** December 04, 2014 | **Published:** December 18, 2014

## Introduction

Croatian Armed Forces (CAF) participate in the international military operations (IMO) for over a decade. According to Matika<sup>1</sup> IMO characterize a new way of military response to world crises and can be divided into peacekeeping, peacemaking, peace building and humanitarian operations. A key aspect of IMO is that they are a form of interventions that restores and maintains peace and involve both civilian and military activities.<sup>2,3</sup> This is the reason why peacekeeping soldier often becomes a third party in the conflict. Despite certain similarities, each military operation is unique in its character. Some of the variables that might differ are the nature of conflict, length of deployment, number of allied troops involved, local opposition and others.<sup>3</sup> These variables indicates that peacekeeping soldier is confronted with different tasks than those we consider traditional military tasks. Military personnel engaged in peacekeeping operations encounter numerous stressful situations which are often different to those encountered during conventional combat situations.<sup>4</sup> According to Schmidtchen<sup>5</sup> this requires the use of nontraditional military skills; soldiers need to have diplomatic skills, ability to negotiate and seek compromises with tolerance. Furthermore, peacekeeping operations are conducted on a foreigner soil and to successfully adapt to multinational environment it is necessary to understand cultural diversities (culture, customs, religion, behavior).<sup>6</sup> It is not unusual that "the line" between confronted parties is blurry, so it is necessary to keep in mind that peacekeeping soldier is in a life threatening situations each day.

Soldier's job is stressful by itself and it is related to soldiers' mental and physical wellbeing. Peacekeeping operation puts even greater demands on soldiers and they are faced with new psychological challenges. Environmental conditions, every day tasks together with rules of engagement puts a challenge in front of a peacekeeping

soldier.<sup>6-8</sup> Because of principles of neutrality and impartiality the rules of engagement are very specific and tend to limit the actions that can be taken.<sup>7</sup> Considering the importance that stress has in the armed forces and soldiers life, it is important to study those factors that reduce the probability of apparition of it. Living in unfamiliar, culturally strange surrounding can be stressful. Therefore, there is need to adjust to new environment. Many studies tried to find out how military engagement in another country affects soldiers and what factors contributes to their adjustment. Findings show that there are lots of stressors which can be encountered.<sup>2,9-11</sup> Findings suggest that soldiers are exposed to; new environmental conditions (such as terrain, climate and weather), new living conditions (such as accommodation, food, hygiene and lack of privacy), work related problems (role conflict, ambiguity of mission, lack of recognition for duties performed), new military tasks (hostile environment, safety threats, diplomacy, restricted rules of engagement, tolerance). However, they may also experience new feelings because of exposure to suffering of civilians (feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness) and separation from family and friends. According to Mitchell<sup>3</sup> soldiers may carry stress from outside of an operation. She argue that everybody brings to operation his everyday problems (with relationships, finances, health) and attitudes toward operation and personal involvement in operation. Personal stressors together with stressors specific to peacekeeping operation can act with negative consequences. Despite potentially harmful stressors, most soldiers cope well with the demands of new role as a peacekeeper and adapt to mission challenges. How well soldiers adapt to these new challenges determines their readiness for the operation and health after returning home.

According to studies<sup>3,11</sup> it is possible to notice some changes in feelings during deployment phases. Pre-deployment phase is very demanding for soldiers; they undertake demanding training to be able to fulfill their duties in the mission. After long and hard training,

deployment is long awaited experience<sup>10,11</sup> what can be seemed as the reason to experience the feelings of excitement and inpatient through beginning of the deployment. While studying peacekeeping operations that last for six months, Schmidtchen<sup>5</sup> found that; first six to eight weeks of deployment soldiers are adapting to new tasks and new environment. This is followed by a period of two or three months where excitement is much lower intensity and soldiers are familiar with their new work assignments. Many studies show that during this period it is necessary for commanders to keep soldiers busy and to well organize their free time.<sup>10,12</sup> According to these researchers, in this period it is possible to encounter boredom which can have negative impact on soldiers' performance. Four to six weeks before the end of deployment soldiers can experience feelings of inpatient and excitement because point of returning home is coming closer. However, according to Schmidtchen<sup>5</sup> a number of soldiers can also feel regret because returning home to their families means losing their "freedom".

Because of negative consequences on a personal and organizational level, lots of studies try to identify factors that led to stress. However, it is necessary to underline that peacekeeping operations are not only stressful with negative consequences. Moreover, studies show that peacekeeping experience has lots of positive aspects for soldiers. Although participating in military operation on a foreign soil is demanding and exhausting experience, studies show that deployment provided them with life long friends and boosted their self esteem<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, soldiers can increase their self awareness, improve perception about personal grow and learn better ways to cope with stress. Beginning of peacekeeping operation can be confusing and full of excitement, and during deployment soldiers deal with lots of stressful factors, but in the end most of them think about it as life worth experience from which they learn about themselves and others.

In order to develop effective stress prevention program and to maintain mental health among soldiers it is necessary to develop a good understanding of the nature and the type of stressors present in the various phases of peacekeeping missions for peacekeepers of the CAF. Understanding the nature of stress on peacekeeping operations is important because individual soldier health as well as mission success depends on how effectively soldiers adapt to these stressors. Thus, the aim of the present study was to examine stress factors during deployment to Afghanistan.

The present study has three specifications:

- a) To investigate stress factors encountered during deployment to Afghanistan,
- b) To examine positive and negative feelings during deployment phases, and
- c) To identify positive aspects of deployment.

## Methodology

### Sample

The participants were drawn from two contingents of soldiers deployed to peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan. Questionnaires were given to a population of 180 participants. This sample population consisted of male participants, average age 37 years old (range 21-49), rank group private to Lt. Colonel were included.

### Instrument

The questionnaire (U-MVO) was designed to reflect the important issues and psychological dimensions relevant to international

military operation in Afghanistan. The questionnaire contains twelve questions; demographic questions (age, gender, number of prior missions, duty in the mission); stress factors; nature of feelings during mission phases; evaluation of psychological preparation for the mission; and 5 open ended questions: the hardest thing in mission; positive experiences from mission; additional information relevant to training improvement.

For the purpose of this study three questions were examined. First question examines stress factors encountered in Afghanistan, second question investigate positive and negative feelings during deployment phases, and the last one aims to identify positive aspects of deployment. The questionnaire could be completed in approximately 15minutes. Question that measure stress factors is based on 18 potential stressors that can be encountered in Afghanistan. Respondents' task was; to respond for 18 potential stressors was it stressful for them (answering YES or NO). If answered YES, second task was to give an assessment on a 5-point Likert scale in terms of how much trouble or concerns was caused by each factor (1=none, 2=low difficulty; 3= medium difficulty; 4=high difficulty; 5=very high difficulty).

Question that examines type of feelings during different phases of deployment (beginning of deployment, middle of deployment, the end of deployment) contains 13 positive and negative feelings. Respondent's assignment was to mark in what phases they felt listed feelings.

Question about positive aspects of deployment is open-ended and required from respondents to list as many positive aspects from deployment they can remember.

### Procedure

Psychological support during post-deployment phase (three months after returning home) involve workshops by applying questionnaire and group discussion with soldiers. The goal of the workshop is psychological debriefing, monitoring in post deployment phase and data collection for further training improvements. The average duration of workshop was 60minutes (26 workshops in total). Groups were made of original groups that worked together in mission (approximately 10 soldiers per group). Soldiers were given 15minutes to complete the questionnaire. This time was found to be appropriate given that the questionnaire was only a page and a half long. This procedure was also found to be appropriate since it is easier for the soldiers to complete the questionnaire and than to have a group discussion about these questions.

## Results and discussion

The purpose of this study was to answer following research questions; the common stress factors encountered in peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan and to what extent do participants experience stress? What is the nature of feelings across operational phases of deployment? What are the positive aspects of deployment?

The first aim was to find out what respondents considered as sources of stress while deployed to Afghanistan. The result indicates that respondents do experience stress related to peacekeeping mission as shown in (Table 1). Almost all of the respondents (95%) have experienced unfamiliar climate as stressful; 88.3% of respondents pointed that separation from family was stressful while 85.6% view culturally strange surrounding as stress factor during deployment. These findings are consistent to studies<sup>6,9,10</sup> that identified different culture and climate together with family separation as sources of peacekeeping stress. Findings of current study reflect that, most of the deployed military personnel are experiencing stress related to

peacekeeping mission and the most stressful factors are factors related to surrounding that is different to country of origin (i.e. culture, climate, and specific illness) and separation from family. Meanwhile, the lack of equipment is perceived as stress factor with the lowest impact among the respondents.

**Table 1** Frequencies of perceived stress factors among peacekeeping soldiers (N=180)

Stress Factors	YES	NO
	(It was stressful)	(It wasn't stressful)
	Percent (%)	Percent (%)
Unfamiliar climate	95	5
Separation from family	88.3	11.7
Culturally strange surroundings	85.6	14.4
Possibility of hazardous illness	81.7	18.3
Concerns about family welfare	75.6	24.4
Different/unfamiliar food	72.8	27.2
Insufficient knowledge of foreign language	71.7	28.3
Safety threats	68.3	31.7
Exposure to suffering of civilian	66.7	33.3
Problem establish Internet comm.	64.4	35.6
Isolation	61.7	38.3
Life threatening situation	58.3	41.7
Poor hygiene level	55	44
Problem with solving family issues	53.3	46.7
Problem establish phone comm.	50	50
Life within multinational team	49.4	50.6
Problems in squad/team	47.2	52.8
Lack of equipment	38.3	61.7

In order to examine intensity of experienced stress factors during deployment, mean scores for all eighteen factors were calculated. Figure 1 gives the mean scores of stress factors reported as the most difficult to deal with during deployment (medium stress intensity). According to results, respondents find the most difficult to deal with unfamiliar/strange cultural surrounding (M=3.06), unfamiliar climate (M=2.90) and possibility of hazardous illness (M=2.89). These findings are consistent with earlier studies<sup>8,12</sup> that identified new/different culture and climate as possible source of stress for peacekeeping soldier. Also, respondents indicated that insufficient knowledge of foreign language was stressful during deployment (M=2.85); soldiers had troubleshooting to communicate with foreign military troops and local personnel. Figure 1 also shows that respondents identified unfamiliar food (M=2.84), concerns about family welfare (M=2.81), separation from family (M=2.78) and exposure to civilian suffering (M=2.51) as stress factors with medium intensity. Findings are consistent with earlier studies.<sup>6,8,10,11</sup>

Table 2 shows list of positive and negative feelings that are possible to encounter during deployment. Respondents were told to recall whether they felt any of these feelings and to mark in which phase of deployment. As can be seen in (Table 2), 66% of respondents indicated that they felt the excitement and 35% of the respondents felt confusion in the beginning of deployment. Result shows that the middle of deployment was characterized with increased self confidence (35%) and increased self competences (34%). On the question regarding the last phase of deployment, respondents reported that they felt happiness (58%) and proud (47%). This is in line with other study<sup>11</sup> which identified similar feelings during deployment phases. According to the results shown in (Table 2), the majority of

respondents had never felt negative feelings such as guilt. However, it can be seen that few respondents experienced feelings of depression, anger and anxiety.

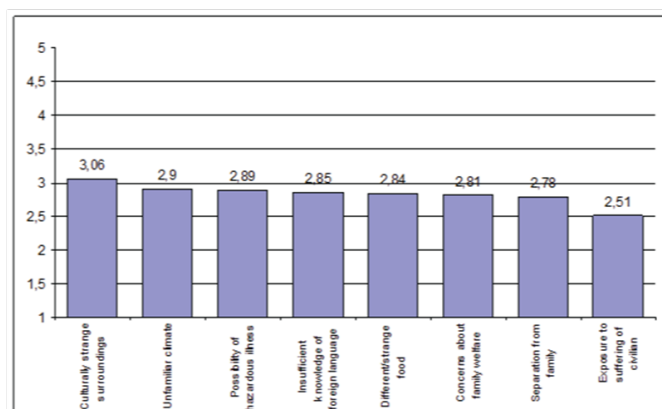
In order to find out the positive aspects from deployment to Afghanistan, the respondents were encouraged to answer an open ended question that required them to list as many positive aspects from deployment they can remember. The result of the open ended question is presented in Table 3. Thematic analysis shown in Table 3 reveals that positive aspects from deployment for respondents are: exploring new experiences, developing interpersonal relationships, exploring personal capacity and sense of pride. According to this result we can see that deployment to Afghanistan is not only related to stressful factors and consequences, but also can be related to positive outcomes. One study found that some of the positive aspects of deployment are positive changes in self concept, relationships with others and perception of personal growth.<sup>13</sup> Current study is in line with earlier study, and shows that military personnel deployed to a peacekeeping operation are faced with many positive effects that enrich their lives.

**Table 2** List of feelings during deployment phases (N=180)

List of feelings	Deployment phases		
	Beginning (%)	Middle (%)	The end (%)
Guilt	1	1	1
Anger	10	11	15
Depression	13	4	5
Confusion	35	0	2
Disappointment	7	6	10
Impatience	19	3	26
Restlessness	9	1	6
Anxiety	11	2	5
Excitement	66	11	27
Happiness	25	16	58
Proud	30	24	47
Increased self-confidence	23	35	41
Increased self-competences	26	34	36

**Table 3** Positive aspects from deployment (N=180)

Items	No.	Percent (%)
Exploring new experiences (New cultures.Ways of life.The work of other armies)	110	61
Developing interpersonal relationships (The importance of teamwork. Comradeship. Equal efforts in the execution of tasks)	72	40
Exploring personal capacity (Increased self confidence.Tolerance.Ability to cope with increasing demands. Increased stress tolerance. Improvement of foreign language skills)	69	38.3
Great life experience	39	21.7
A sense of pride for participating in this type of mission	25	13.9
A sense of pride due to the ability of the Croatian army to conduct such tasks	15	8.3



**Figure 1** Mean scores of stress factors perceived as the most difficult to deal with during deployment (N=180).

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First of all, respondents were asked to recall a period of six months in Afghanistan. This could be viewed as a negative factor since soldiers are required to reflect back on a six month deployment period, three month after returning home. Possible factors that could have had an influence in this regard include; some information may have been forgotten; the initial level of stress had already declined because the respondents are back in a familiar and safe environment; compensating possible traumatic first month of deployment with positive last month can reflect that mission was better than it was; single negative experience closer to the end of the deployment may lead to an overall negative appreciation of the hole period of deployment.

All findings are based upon self report data and do not reflect formal diagnostic assessment, and lastly, because of the nature of the data it is difficult to establish any psychometric properties of the questionnaire.

## Conclusion and implications

From the foregoing findings, the results clearly show that peacekeeping operations are stressful and peacekeeping soldiers are under stress during deployment. The stress factors identified as the most stressful are related to different climate and cultural surrounding, together with separation from family. Results indicate that participants experience medium stress intensity. The results suggest that a nature of feelings varies across deployment phases; excitement and confusion in the beginning of deployment, increased self-confidence and self-competence in the middle and feelings of happiness and proud at the end of deployment. Current study also found out that, there are many positive aspects from deployment to Afghanistan. Participants state that it is an experience that broadened their horizon, a period characterized by comradeship, an experience that increased their self-confidence. Therefore, based on foregoing findings, this study provides useful information and leads to recommendations for training and psychological preparation of soldiers preparing for deployment to peacekeeping mission. The study reveals that some of the stress factors could be minimized; especially the impact of the negative consequences associated with peacekeeping stress. Nevertheless, study implicate that it's necessary to further investigate this field and with this awareness it is possible to improve psychological preparation for soldiers deployed to international military operations.

## Acknowledgments

Very special thanks go to Lt. Col Slavko Stojanovic and Capt Danijel Loncaric for their consistent support, guidance and encouragement throughout all phases of the development of this study. I am deeply grateful for the confidence, for being a constant source of knowledge in this field and for always sustaining me in pursuing my own ideas; I am most indebted to the extremely friendly atmosphere on a professional and personal level.

## Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

## Funding

None.

## References

1. Matika D. Sudjelovanje OS RH u međunarodnim vojnim misijama – stajališta hrvatske javnosti i casnika OS RH. *Drustvena istrazivanja* . 2009;18(3):355–369.
2. Garrido M J, Munoz MJ. Morale As a Protection Factor against Mission Related Stress. In Human Dimensions in Military Operations-Military Leaders' Strategies for Addressing Stress and Psychological Support. Meeting Proceedings RTO-MP-HFM-134, paper 10, France. 2006. p.10–20.
3. Mitchell J. Mental Health Stresses and Services for Military Peacekeepers. *New Voices in Public Policy*. 2009;4.
4. Greenberg N, Thomas SL, Iversen A, et al. Do military peacekeepers want to talk about their experiences? Perceived Psychological Support of UK Military Peacekeepers on Return from Deployment. *Journal of Mental Health*. 2003;12(6):565–573.
5. Schmidtchen D. Preparing and Training Peacekeepers: The Need for "Soft Skills". In Proceedings of the 39th Annual Conference of the IAMPS, Australia. 1997.
6. Koopman R, van Dyk, Gideon AJ. Peacekeeping Operations and Adjustment of Soldiers in Sudan: Peace in the Minds and Hearts of Soldiers? *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*. 2012;12(3):53–76.
7. Collyer RS. Human performance issues in urban military operations. Defense Science and Technology Organisation Systems Sciences. Edinburgh, South Australia. 2003.
8. Nikolova R, Alexiev L, Vukov M. Research potential of a Heart Rate Variability Diagnostic System for the Study of Stress and Health Risk in Peacekeeping Operations. In Meeting Proceedings RTO-MP-HFM-108. Hungary. 2004. p.1815.
9. Adler A, Dolan C, Bienvenu R, et al. US Soldier Peacekeeping Experiences and Well-being after Returning From Deployment to Kosovo. In Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference of the IAMPS, Croatia. 2000.
10. Bartone PT, Adler AB, Vaitkus MA. Dimensions of Psychological Stress in Peacekeeping Operations. *Military Medicine*. 1998;163(9):587–593.
11. Van Dyk G. The Role of Military Psychology in Peacekeeping Operations. *South African Journal of Military Studies (Scientia Militaria)*. 2009;37(1):113–135.
12. Bartone PT, Adler AB. A Model for Soldier Psychological Adaptation in Peacekeeping Operations. Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference of the International Military Testing Association, Netherlands. 1994.
13. Dirkzwager AJE, Bramsen I, Ploeg HM van der. Factors Associated with Posttraumatic Stress among Peacekeeping Soldiers. *Anxiety, Stress and Coping Journal*. 2005;18(1):37–51.