Command Stress: An Analysis

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Introduction

Command, in the military sense, is an organisational as well as a cognitive function. Command is a rigid concept, without much room for interpretation. A commander has the final word; he is the one who exercises power, the one who is in control. It falls to him to grab the reins, set the objective(s), marshal his forces, and ensure that objectives are achieved — efficiently, effectively and in accordance with the directive(s) of higher headquarters. The essence of command is the ability to deal successfully with uncertainty, and to function effectively in the absence of complete information. Historically, success in command has stemmed from a commander's ability to get the best out of his command and control system, through structuring, training and developing his organisation.

Command implies the need for a commander to integrate the particulars of a situation—including those he has not seen, but must infer— into his understanding, while avoiding unrealistic generalities. It includes a special concern for friction—the effects of particular, localised occurrences upon the outcome. Troops that do not perform as well as they should, due to their physical, logistical or psychological shortcomings, can hamper a commander's ability to bring about a desired result. The "eye of command" encompasses the understanding by the commander, which connects his experience to the broader context of the situation at hand. The commander must also be aware of the psychological state of his soldiers, and their morale and motivation, as well as the best tactical options to tackle a situation. However, command and leadership do not always come together in one person.

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Stress results when person-environment transactions lead an individual to perceive a discrepancy, whether real or not, between the demands of a situation and the resources of the person's biological, psychological or social systems. Stress is a subjective phenomenon. Demands which cause one person to feel stress may not cause another to react in the same way. Stress occurs when an individual is faced with demands that he finds impossible or difficult to satisfy. The demands can call for physical action, mental analysis, or emotional reactions. The defining characteristic of stress is that an individual feels incapable of satisfying the demands made.

The existence of stressors and consequent stress is part of everyday life and the subject of informal debate in the military. Recognition of the existence of stress, particularly in commanders, has not been sufficiently studied or acknowledged. Command is no longer hierarchical. Its function is not merely control or the ability to influence events indirectly, from a distance. A commander issues orders and instructions to subordinates, suggestions to commanders of adjacent units, and requests and reports to supporting units and superiors, while maintaining a situational awareness of his area of operations. However, in case the commander is merely a processor of inputs and a generator of messages, he falls into the danger of becoming a prisoner of events.

For military commanders deployed in operational areas, the stress of combat not only affects them as individuals, it influences the performance of units under them. The underlying theory of the doctrine of command responsibility is simple: military commanders are responsible for the acts of their subordinates. That makes controlling stress paramount. The control of combat stress often makes the difference between victory and defeat in any form of human conflict. When combat stress is well controlled by focussed training, effective leadership, high morale and unit cohesion, soldiers are more apt to endure confrontation with extraordinary levels of stress in order to accomplish their missions.

The focus of this paper is an analysis of the stress military commanders face when on operations in what are abnormal situations. The battlefield (or any operational environment) differs from any non-military situation in its uncertainties and pressures. The modern battlefield is likely to be even more demanding than those of the past due to the tempo and intensity created by modern weapon systems and the scope for unfamiliar threats that are likely to increase the friction of combat and so put new and greater demands on soldiers. However, any attempt to convey verisimilitude is a chimera. This

paper is, therefore aimed at providing an understanding without being judgmental and, thus, providing an understanding of the problem of stress and military commanders.

Experience, and preparation in the form of training and awareness, can reduce some of the adverse effect of stressors and, in some instances, might remove a particular source of pressure entirely. But there will always be some potential causes of stress, and it is important that commanders understand what these might be and learn to recognise their effect both on themselves and on others.

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Identifying Stressors

There is no single agreed definition of stress. The measurement of stress is exceedingly complex, but there is now a considerable amount of evidence about its symptoms:

- Stress impairs the social, psychological and physical functioning of an individual.
- People experiencing stress are more likely to have psychological changes i.e. increased irritability, anxiety and tension, and unpredictability at work.
- Stressed individuals are more likely to make errors and exhibit slower reaction times, and manifest poorer productivity and deficits in judgement.
- Individuals who are stressed are more susceptible to disease since an effect of stress seems to be to depress the auto-immune system.
- Continued stress over substantial periods of time results in changes in other aspects of behaviour, such as increased substance abuse (e.g. alcoholism).
- Long-term effects of stress include chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and asthma attacks.
- There is some evidence that continued stress is associated with an increased likelihood of marital breakdown and of suicide.

Given the personal and the concomitant organsational costs of stress, it is worth trying to understand better the sources of stress. Thus, it may be possible to ameliorate them or, in some cases, eliminate them. Most stressors are not specific to any one organisation; they occur in varying degrees in most institutions. Many of the stressors which characterise the experience of senior

commanders in the military bear resemblance to those experienced in managerial positions in other professions, though some stressors are very specific to the military. The significant point is that the stress experienced tends to be specific to particular contexts.

Military organisational culture implicitly, and often explicitly, rejects the reality of stress as anything more than an excuse for inadequate performance. Stress is not treated as a genuine medical condition. This is due to a traditional tendency to stigmatise those who exhibit stress reactions. To that extent, it acts as a form of stressor in itself for those who face significant pressures. They recognise that they should not acknowledge that they feel stressed. To do so would be a form of failure. Revealing of stress results in some form of stigma and acts as a pressure in itself. Contemporary military culture subtly denigrates those who suffer stress.

Identifying the stressors inherent in any particular context is difficult since it is often reliant upon the report of the individuals within the situation and their reports may be subject to social desirability effects. Military officers can be very sensitive to what they believe are the social norms concerning stressors.

Three types of stress—organisational, interpersonal and psychological—are discussed. (There are physical stressors also but they have been precluded from this analysis as they relate to individual facets of personality and mental make-up). In each type, there are stressors which could be said to be generic to any job in any organisation, and stressors which can clearly be said to be highly specific to the military. These are tabulated as under(Table 1).

Table 1: Types of Stressors

Organisational	Interpersonal	Psychological
Organisational culture. Cross-cultural contacts. Working between/ across organisations. Mission drift. Public interest. Training deficits. Multiple roles. Command arrangements. Rules of engagement. Communication systems. Managing change. Inequity in recognition. Stereotypes. Inter-unit rivalry. Organisational arrangements. Workload. Equipment problems.	Command relationships. Peer groups relationships. Relationship with subordinates. Team dynamics. Dealing with multiple fatalities.	Memory. limitations. Capacity to delegate. Fear of failure/ reputation. Ambition.

Organisational Factors

Organisational Culture: Military officers are generally comfortable with a rigid hierarchical structure and can find a less than precise chain of command a stress factor. Being asked to decide, sometimes alone and without support, how to achieve designated objectives (rather than simply to implement a plan for action) is problematic. Military cultures assume that there are military solutions to problem situations and further assume that they will be clear-cut. Pressure arises when this cultural expectation is breached. Modern military operations frequently involve problem situations which cannot be reconciled, in that there is no absolute solution. Thus, solutions are partial, and often are compromises. Officers who fail to recognise this constraint upon their efficacy, harbour unrealistic expectations of themselves and of their potential impact. This can result in the experience of subjective stress.

Cross–Cultural Contacts Within the Organisation: Military operations have virtually always involved cross-cultural contacts. Modern operations require co-working at an altogether different level. Close cooperation, sometimes operating in joint headquarters or teams comprising Service personnel from different countries, or different arms or Services, creates pressures. In so far as the cultures within which officers are asked to work are characterised by markedly different organisational styles, different command ethos, variety of openness, reliability and professionalism can create difficulties, specially when under pressure. Essentially, it introduces unpredictability into the system, and challenges expectations and assumptions. By doing so, it reduces the control which the officer perceives himself to have. The feeling of diminished control is a prime source of stress.

Working Across and Between Organisations: Increasingly, counter-insurgency operations are mounted within a framework different from the norm. This means that officers, at virtually all levels, are expected to deal with the complexities of other organisations which intervene in the process of decision-making and resourcing an operation, but which lack an adequate command structure. The slow speed of decision-making and vacillation which sometimes results can be a significant pressure for officers in the field who need definitive answers to questions and who expect adequate resources.

Mission Drift: In some operations, officers can be drawn into activities which are not the core to the original task. For example, in counter-insurgency operations, they might be drawn excessively into building infrastructure to support a community. Without clear guidance from the higher command, such operations can leave officers losing sight of their central purpose. It can be beneficial for keeping morale high, countering boredom, etc,but it can bring the officer substantial pressure if the self-determined objectives are significantly outside the original task, and require unjustifiable resources or risk. Sometimes, officers, in their search for substantial missions, create problems for themselves and, in doing so, for their senior commanders. Mission drift or creep may occur at an altogether different level. The task, as defined by the senior command, may gradually, without explicit articulation, change. For instance, the political rationale which dictated deployment may disappear and new political purposes or exigencies emerge. The problem for the commander arises where there is no clear redefinition of the role to be performed. In such circumstances, the officer may experience uncertainty about priorities. Such uncertainty generates self - doubt and acts as a source of stress.

Public Concern / Interest: Military operations are increasingly subject to public

scrutiny and the activities of individual commanders and their units are now often represented in media reports. The rationale and justifiability of missions have become, on occasion, a matter of public debate. This process can result in commanders feeling that the media coverage is biased: failing to appreciate the importance of their contribution; misrepresenting their motives; or simply getting the facts wrong. Senior commanders are also subjected to another media pressure. The media represents various versions of what the public thinks of an operation. These representations, while they are unlikely to influence a commander's actions, are capable of imposing a burden upon any commander who must take decisions which may clearly meet with public rejection (for example, engaging in action which places many lives at risk). Awareness of the power of the media can work in the opposite direction. Commanders can find it in their own interests (or those of their unit) to use the media to engage public support and interest. While this is not inevitably a source of pressure, many officers discover that media interest, once initiated, is not easy to control or curtail. It is at the point that the officer loses the initiative that the problems arise.

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Training Deficits: Units and individuals are trained for war generally, rather than specific operations. The need for, and value of,operation-specific training is not always appreciated. Commanders identify these deficits as a source of pressure. There is also a lack of realism in training. The transition from exercise to operation can be abrupt and disruptive of expectations. In-theatre training is often constrained by time and resource limitations. Commanders often report that the unavailability of in-theatre training opportunities can be a source of frustration and irritation, knowing that a training need exists. The sense of having no control or inadequate control over training requirements can act as a stressor.

Multiple Roles: Commanders sometimes find themselves occupying complex, multifaceted roles. For instance, an officer may be commanding part of his unit in an operational theatre but is also responsible for the remainder of his unit in the rear party. He will be dealing with the demands of the operation and, at the same time, with the day-to-day administration of soldiers not involved in the theatre. In this situation, the commander is effectively facing in two directions at once. Most find this problematic, although some find that the dual focus interfaces with efficiency.

Command Arrangements: Wherever command arrangements are unclear, commanders are likely to experience unnecessary pressure. Arrangements can be blurred because force reorganisation results in overlap (perhaps for short periods of time) in areas of responsibility or because some ambiguity in the chain of command allows several senior commanders to legitimately give conflicting orders to a more junior officer. In an ideal world, this would not occur. In reality, it does occur and acts as a pressure for all the officers concerned.

Rules of Engagement: Whilst commanders will obey rules of engagements to the best of their ability, they can create pressure where the commander believes that they put his men at risk unreasonably and when they are perceived to be mainly inhibiting or unrealistic.

Communication System: Failure to establish a good down-the-line system of information delivery can result in officers gaining more from other sources than their own chain of command. It results in commanders feeling that they are the 'last to know' when they should have been properly briefed. 'Instant' or informal reporting effectively interferes with the chain of command. The exaggerated 'need to know' on the part of commanders, when thwarted, generates pressure. Hardware limitations on communication are infrequent but where they occur, can also be a vital pressure on a commander.

Managing Change: Commanders recognise that the rate of change in the military, in terms of philosophy and staffing, is considerable. Change, irrespective of its direction, is a source of stress. Repeated change, especially which has no rationale that can be understood by those affected by it, is a prime stressor. Commanders experience this pressure of change and also the problems of implementing change. On operations, the background changes which are happening interact with the demand for changes in terms of operational posture, relating to a changing operational situation amidst modifications in command philosophy. Commanders are required to navigate in a sea of change. Most succeed admirably because they have learned to cope with the uncertainties attached to processes of introducing change. However, tolerance for such uncertainties and the flexibility of mind this entails is not infinite. Such tolerance, if used too often, loses its resilience and starts to fracture.

Inequality in Recognition: All humans engage, more or less continually, in social comparison. They judge their own worth in comparison to others and are particularly concerned to receive equal reward and recognition for equal effort and achievement. The military system for giving recognition (e.g. for awarding honours) is regarded by many officers as inequitable. This gives rise to some disaffection. The sense that the system is unfair in some respects acts

as a pressure on some officers, particularly those in less glamorous but vital roles.

Stereotypes: Some commanders are affected by the stereotypes which the public or other military personnel hold about their unit. Where these stereotypes are well-established, it is difficult to ignore them completely. They impinge upon the conduct of the members of the unit and there is pressure to act in accordance with them. In some cases, this impact can be very positive, leading to acts of courage and great determination to succeed. However, in some contexts, the stereotype calls for patterns of action which are inappropriate to the specific mission and this can lead to difficulties for the commander who must control the inclination of his unit to fulfill the requirements of the stereotype as well as his own temptation to succumb to it. Resisting the pull of the stereotype can be insidious and very subtle.

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Inter-Unit Rivalry: Healthy rivalry can be productive, but rivalry between units on operations can become unhealthy, especially when personalised between commanders or when linked to personal ambition. Commanders should channel rivalry and control its level; otherwise, it can become an unhelpful burden.

Propaganda: Protagonists in a conflict will use propaganda in many ways in order to reduce the effectiveness of opponents. This includes questioning the motives and morality of third parties who may be present in the conflict, especially in counter-insurgency operations. To be attacked in this way, when you feel that you are 'only there to help', can be difficult to accept. Some commanders find such attacks irritating and frustrating.

Organisational Arrangements: Composite units and formations are potentially more difficult to command and less effective than those that have a peace-time or non-operational coherence and stability and whose members have operated and trained together. However, composite units are increasingly the norm of operations, and commanders can be unready for dealing with them. Even integrated units often have to be heavily reinforced for operations by individuals and, sometimes, by complete sub-units. The effects on command of such accretions to established units are not understood by many officers.

Work Load: The most obvious stressor is sheer pressure of work. Some commanders do not manage their workload well. For instance, they fail to

delegate appropriately or they resist taking breaks which are legitimate. In this sense, officers can 'invent' an excessive workload for themselves. Others are simply faced with demands which are overwhelming and in which they do not collude in generating (this is particularly true of staff officers and, in the initial phases of deployments, of logisticians). In considering workload, commanders sometimes fail to understand that mental workloads interact with physical workloads. It is necessary to monitor both in order to maintain efficiency.

Equipment Functionality: Equipment failure or poor design is an obvious source of command stress. It becomes a particular pressure if it is known that the opponent has superior equipment.

Equipment Availability: Next to equipment failure, equipment unavailability can be a major pressure. This focusses upon desires for both necessary equipment and adequate spares. Commanders often report stress when their requests for what they see to be essential supplies are ignored or reprioritised. This sometimes comes about because individual commanders are not aware of the overall plan to which they have to work and are not aware of the constraints which inevitably curtail supply.

Interpersonal Stressors

Command Relationships: Poor command relationships are potentially the single greatest source of stress. A commander needs to engender trust and confidence. If these are not present, the relationship with subordinates will become a source of friction and stress. Achieving trust and confidence is, of course, extraordinarily difficult. Commanders can create problems for themselves when they fail to understand that they must help subordinates deal with their own stresses. Commanders who cannot spare the intellectual or emotional energy to support and encourage subordinates who are having difficulties coping with their own stressors, can find themselves cut off from vital support when they need to deal with pressures themselves. The implicit reciprocity requirements of informal support are sometimes misunderstood. Commanders sometimes fail to use informal support which is provided within the Service hierarchy that can relieve the loneliness of command.

Peer Group Relationships: Commanders at similar status levels can find themselves engaged in counter-productive rivalries (often unconsciously). Peer group relationships would be more productive for the Service if they were concerned with comradeship and mutual support, but they are usually riddled with envy and competitiveness. The pressure to outperform one's peers can be

constructive in some ways (pushing toward perfection) but it can be destructive in others if it promotes individualism rather than corporate success. The system creates an environment where people learn each other's strengths and weaknesses. The costs of an error in such a system are very high: memories are long and tongues are active. This creates a particular type of pressure for a commander as second chances are rare.

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Team Dynamics: Command, in military culture, tends towards an individual rather than being a team function. As a consequence, commanders are selected as individuals rather than as team members. It is rare that a 'command team' is put together in order to take account of the constellation of talents of its members. This can lead to significant pressure for a commander who finds that the team composition fails to complement his skills and expertise. The use of deputies, particularly in senior command positions, is little understood. This leads to problems for the commander and the deputy.

Dealing with Multiple Fatalities: Commanders who have encountered the aftermath of mass destruction where many have been killed or injured, often find that the images (visual, auditory, olfactory) live with them for a long time. Whether the dead are comrades or the enemy seems unimportant in this reaction. It is the carnage itself which has the emotional effect. Any resulting decrement in immediate performance may be transient but the experience may have a permanent effect upon the way a commander feels about the prospect of battle. Commanders tasked with cremating the dead will also be faced with the trauma that this represents for the members of their command.

Psychological Stressors

Memory Limitations: There are big differences between people in their abilities to memorise new information and retrieve old information from memory. There are also substantial differences in long and short-term memory capacities. In the complex modern theatres of operation, a good memory is a vital capacity for a commander. Anyone who has a poor memory is seriously disadvantaged. Commanders with poor memories will find themselves under pressure. This can be very disconcerting and can result in errors. For instance, things can be completely forgotten or only partially recalled or creatively misremembered.

Commanders who recognise that they are not performing at their normal level can find memory problems acting as prime stressors.

Capacity to Delegate: Commanders who will not or cannot delegate are more likely to experience stress when faced with significant increases in pressures. Failure to delegate by a senior commander can, of course, in turn, act as a source of stress for a subordinate waiting to be allowed to take responsibilities.

Fear of Failure and the Importance of Reputation: Commanders who have never operated at a particular level in the past may be unsure as to how they will perform, particularly whether they will be able to handle a crisis or a dangerous situation. This uncertainty about how they will respond to new demands tends to weigh heavily upon the relatively inexperienced officer. This fear of failure is often greater than the fear of physical danger. Commanders do not wish to let down either themselves or their unit. For more experienced officers, established reputations must be maintained and enhanced. The pressure to build a good reputation can lead to excessive risk taking and disappointments where opportunities for success are either not available or not capitalised upon.

Ambition: Some commanders are driven to seek or accept inappropriate appointments by a desire not to be left out of critical actions or by a fear that others might 'get the glory'. The strong sense in the military that opportunities for 'real action' are rare and may occur only once in an entire career leads officers to emphasise the importance of being included and to assume dire consequences for their career if they perform poorly in their one chance.

Conclusion

It is not within the scope of this article to describe how stressors may be removed or their impacts ameliorated. The purpose has been to document the enormous variety of stressors that the modern commander might face. This taxonomy should be useful for commanders to identify which types of stressor they are experiencing and which types they personally find difficult to manage. If they can do this, they are closer to knowing where they should focus their attention when trying to predict their own stress reactions. It is then possible to train to control both the stressor and one's reaction to it.

It must be acknowledged that people will not readily admit the effects of stressors or their importance. It is neither socially desirable to do so nor likely to make a positive contribution to self-image. However, to willfully ignore the significance of the pressures for command is to court inefficiency, if not disaster. It is far more beneficial to identify the stressors, analyse their causes, and eradicate or, at least, control them and their impact.