

Military Leader's Role in Psychological Support during Deployment

Col. Ondřej Novosad

JOC General Staff

Kutuzovova 8

Bratislava 832 27

SLOVAK REPUBLIC

ondrej.novosad@mil.sk

ABSTRACT

Slovak armed forces (SAF) have taken taking part in Modern Military operations (NATO / UN peace keeping mission) since 1993. However SAF newer participated in so extremely dangerous and life threatening military operation, Slovak soldiers continuously fulfilling their tasks in central Iraq longer than two years.

That information comprises factually experiences from Commanders of the 1st Slovak engineer contingent in Iraq -- Col. NOVOSAD. All of his pieces of knowledge are presented from realistic points of view, without any distortion. In second part, there is included an explanation of various differences between deployed soldiers expectation and the reality in Area of Operation (its position, tasks, limitations) and possible consequences during deployment to Iraq. It is intended to let an experience (lessons learnt) from Operation Iraqi freedom, to show any possible influence of adverse factors (life threatening, lack of needs, or extreme climate condition) to serving soldiers, and finally how to keep psychological readiness and how to develop positive moral within unit member during the operational deployment.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Col NOVOSAD had taken part in 3 missions /UN, NATO, coalition/ until he started his career on the SAF JOC. He spent 28 months in former Yugoslavia under UN and NATO leadership. As Slovak NCC in KOSOVO and as Deputy battalion Commander in Eastern Slavonia. Moreover he was in Iraq as the Slovak NCC under Coalition forces command.

Capt ŠTEPO is an occupational psychologist with special military training. He had been working in Immediate Reaction Battalion for two years when the OIF started and he was sent to Kuwait with NBC unit in 2003. After that his combat career continued as a member of Engineer unit in Central Iraq under the Polish multinational division command.

Nowadays we know that lack of an experienced commander and a psychologist still seem to be the main limitation of SAF progress. The "process of commanding" in units which were set together - ad hoc – right before mission is rather complicated. But now it has changed continuously according to new pieces of knowledge from human factor issues in modern operation under the adverse conditions.

All of them have exact information about the effect of hostile, non friendly environment to soldiers. That is the reason why they can give a knowledgeable inputs and lessons learns.

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1.0 SELECTION AND PREPARATION BEFORE DEPLOYMENT RTO FIRST

In the short history of the SAF selection is one of the most important parts. All of the potential soldiers must be perfectly fit and trained both physically and psychologically. On the starting line every aspirant has to be well trained, in a good physical condition and screened by psychologist. If those three requirements are accomplished, the special preparation training can start. Main premise is based on the specialists, who are perfectly prepared individually to cope with saturation, frustration and other stressors in the Area of Operation. Specialists with extremely effective group cohesion skills (to maintain cooperation in group). On the other side they must know the real conditions they are going to. That level of expectation is one of the most important parts (see figure 1).

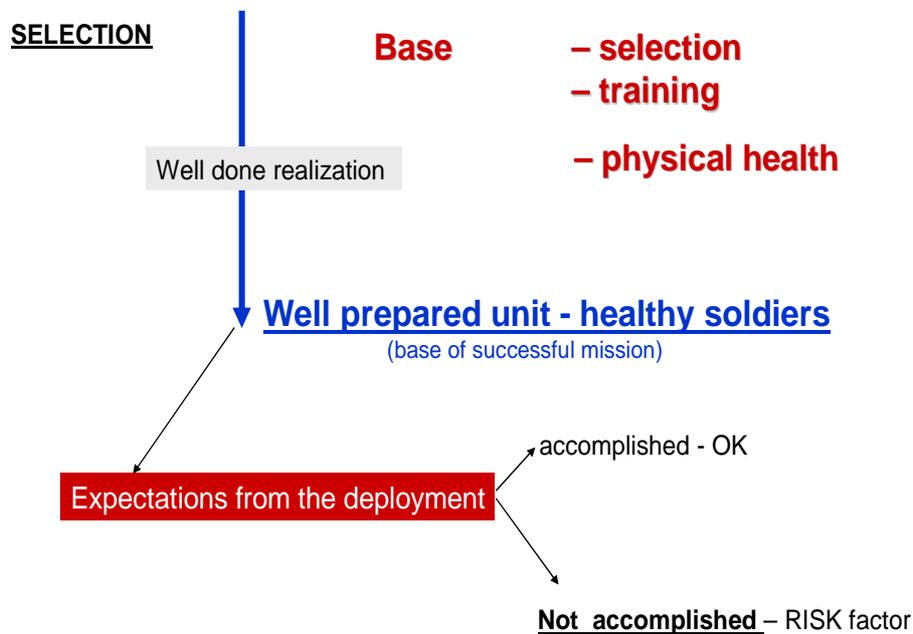


Figure 1: position of expectations factor

During the pre-deployment preparation soldiers receive a lot of information about the AOR. That is permanently upgraded according to the latest information on Iraq. In special psychological part of the preparation for the mission in Iraq the psychologist presents most of the issues that could become stressors for soldiers in Iraq like climate, lack of physical need, poor communication with home. On the other side there are some imperfection caused wrinkles on commander face before first rotation. For example:

- Replacements of commander in the final phase of unit preparation - National Commander and Company commander as well were suddenly replaced during final phase of preparation.
- distrust to technical equipment – Slovak trucks and jeeps were developed for using in different climatic conditions
- Quality of personal equipment - it supposed be proof, resilient and durable for extreme climatic, life threatening condition as well as easy wearable and comfortable.

2.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT DURING DEPLOYMENT

After the first rotation in Iraq - Al Hilla some changes started in SAF. While the attitude in human factor before Iraq was oriented to prepare an excellent specialist, now the selection process and all the training cycles is now focused on increasing of **psychological readiness** to accomplish mission under extreme and stressful conditions. My soldiers expected an easy mission, money and plenty of experiences. But they received isolation, saturation and frustration. The former and current attitudes are compared in Figure 2.

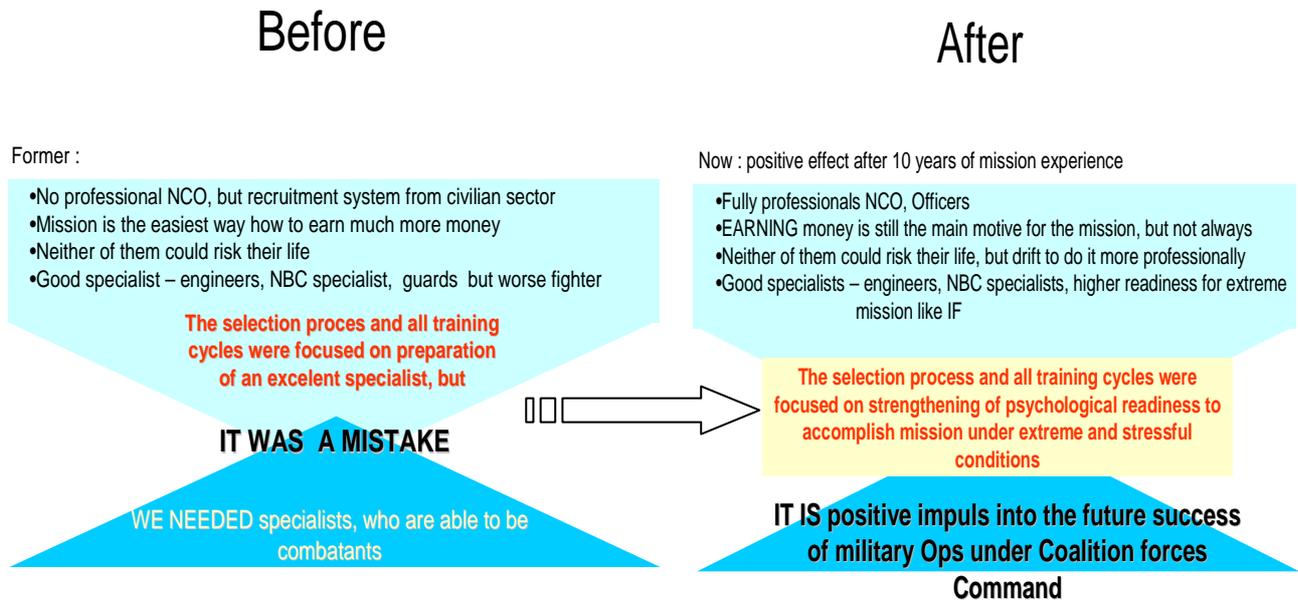


Figure 2: The former and current attitudes

Taking part in the mission in Iraq was a turning point for the future of SAF. Firstly most of SAF soldiers had to revise their motivation for the mission. Secondly their expectations were confronted with the reality and finally they realized, that serving in a foreign mission could be dangerous and life threatening. I had to wake up them from false expectations and turn over to reality. As a commander I had to be prepared for that. (See figure 3).

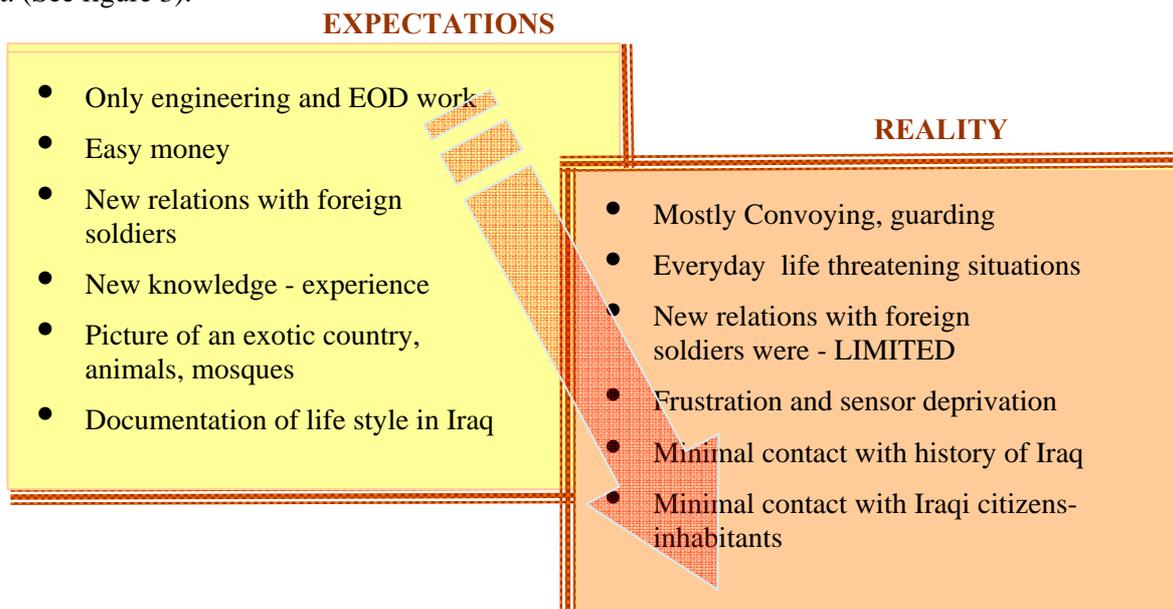


Figure 3: From expectations to reality

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In addition, during his service in Iraq the commander as a leader and manager had to deal with new circumstances, conditions and he had to find new postures or made unusual, untypical decisions every day. There were special kinds of stressors attacking commander above of all. Nobody could measure that invisible and treacherous stressor, which could have devastating effect to commander, his personality and assuredness in successful command. Generally it can be named by one word - **responsibility**, one sentence. "Commander is **responsible** for life of his all subordinates, **responsible** for success in operation, **responsible** for final decisions, responsible for moral state in unit. He must be strong, fair-minded, patient and appropriate sensitive to every even imperceptible signal from his unit."

The main unexpected activities as commander I was constrained to train them even during deployment. It included those activities:

- **Convoy procedures** – completely (we had never participated in a mission like OIF before)
- **Set of Training against** every kind of possible **attacks by enemy** (IED, WBED, mortar attack...)
- **Preparation** for **reunion** conducted by psychologist
- **Special security preparation** to recognize and avoid IED
- permanently emphasize the necessity of keeping away from unknown things, military or weapon accessories – **IED-mine safety** according to the latest information

Main stressor concerning human factor which commander had to solve permanently were:

- Distrust to risk environment- underestimation
- Suspicion with safety of military material and weapons reliability
- Isolation, limited connection with home – submarine illness
- Lack of regular leaves - only emergency leave were permitted

3.0 LESSONS LEARNT FROM IRAQ AFTER THE FIRST ROTATION

Experiences from first rotation became the base for substantial personal preparation. Bulk of soldiers consulted with their family members (wives, girlfriends) before they made final decision. It caused decreasing the number of homefront causes during deployment. They woke up and stopped expect an easy mission, money and plenty of experiences. They hate me and celebrate my authority as well. From the beginning I had to be strong and adamant about my decisions. I had no time for extensive explanation some of my decisions and also in situations like that I as Commander accepted psychologists presence and I felt his help.

- **SAF engineers were great specialist but they had to be retrained from engineers - specialists to combat engineers, which were ready to fight according to the needs.**
- **Acquired experience was the basis for fallowing rotation as the newest experience from Iraq was included in the training**
- **The premise "Commander is / was nothing without his soldiers and staff." is always valid, especially in adverse condition in Iraq.**
- **Preparation for homecoming as a part of systematic effect on a soldier even DURING the deployment and in cooperation with specialists (commander, psychologist and also chaplain)**
- **Rebuild and fortify in SAF soldiers trust in their combat readiness even though they were not trained for it**

4.0 TOPICS WHICH REMAIN OPEN

Psychological care and reunion support after deployment should be an inseparable element of human sources management in SAF, not only for deployed soldiers. Missions became a menace to soldiers because of uneasiness linked with homecoming

- More than half of my soldiers were veterans with exact experiences from UN mission, some of them took part in NATO mission in Kosovo, but most of them felt lack of general care after deployment.
- Approximately one third of them were afraid of losing their positions and dismissal after homecoming.
- Most of them claimed, that in SAF that NO „After mission care program“ is realized.
- They have only minimal chance how to deal with their emotions, feelings, experiences.....

In the past there was requirement neither need to take care of the soldiers coming home from missions. The possible reasons were following:

- SAF have only 12 years of separate history and we had no other combat experience before.
- We did not register any PTSD case, more over and the character of a UN mission did not produce any extremely dangerous situations.
- We have never lost any soldier under enemy attack before tragic moment on June 2004 (3 victims after mortar attack)
- There were not any requirements for reunion or family preparation training.
- We have no fully organic units in the mission yet.

In conclusion the soldiers who served in Iraq missed family care after homecoming. That was a result of short history of the SAF in combination with only minimal practical combat experience.

5.0 CONCLUSION

At the conclusion I would like to emphasize fact that Slovak Armed forces have to face bulk of specific, partial problems which could be invisible for soldiers, but essential for commander. The most of soldier presents that they took in abroad “combat **mission**”, but they have not realized the real truth yet. Skilled and experienced commanders have deeper insight and know we are still waiting for first deployment to “the Combat Operation“. It is one of the hardest things for commanders how eliminate possible misinformation and rumors and how unit moral and cohesion within unit empower. In this presentation I would like to share with you with my personal experience from the command and leadership with people in adverse conditions and in complicated relations.

Thank You for your attention!

