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Being at war: Norwegian Afghanistan veterans' experiences of military service and their coping strategies related to deployment, combat and stressful situations.

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Foreword

The aim of the study was to gain insight into the mind frame and coping mechanisms used by Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. Looking at how the soldiers regard deployment to a warzone and experiencing combat. Analysis of the data attempted to describe how they respond to combat situations. Knowledge about this process might increase our understanding of the factors that produce adverse health effects.

I did not have any co-authors or external funding. Every part of the process from collecting data, analysis, translation and producing the report were conducted by me.

I wish to thank the veterans for allowing me to interview them. For their honesty and sincerity.

Without my supervisors Gunnvald Kvarstein and Mette Bech Risør it would not have been possible to write this thesis. Their experience and constructive feedback were essential to the project.

I have felt a great responsibility during this process. Deployments eventually end. The feeling of respect for those who gave their lives does not.

Jørgen Jensen Ribe

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Summary

Background: The Norwegian military contribution to Afghanistan has resulted in thousands of soldiers being deployed. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the factors that contribute to the development of mental health problems. Isolating and describing why, and in which setting these potential stressors produce adverse health effects are challenging. It may be dependent on how the individual subjectively perceives the situation. More knowledge about this process might be of use in identifying which events are more likely to have adverse effects on mental health. The aim of the study was to gain insight into the mind frame and coping mechanisms used by Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. Looking at how the soldiers regarded deployment to a warzone and experienced combat. Analysis of the data attempted to describe how they responded to combat situations.

Method: Qualitative interviews using thematic analysis were applied to interpret the data. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted. The participants are former soldiers with an average at 8,8 years of service. Each participant had either three or four deployments to Afghanistan.

Results: Analysis identified four main themes. Theme 1 (Subjective perception on deployment) explores how the participants view being deployed. Theme 2 (The first firefight) and theme 3 (The death of a colleague) explore how the soldiers perceive and react in the situations implied by the theme. Theme 4 (No plan survives the confrontation with reality) looks at severe situations where things can go wrong.

Conclusion: The participants in the study had a positive mind frame towards deployment to Afghanistan. Combat situations were framed as both positive and negative. The findings suggest that the ability to personally and effectively intervene is regarded as an important criterion for how the participants view success, regardless of personal risk or outcome of a combat situation. This study further suggests that coping strategies in the military unit can be a cooperative project. It is indicated that non-danger-based events may be perceived as more traumatic than danger-based events while they are unfolding.

1 Introduction

1.1 Norwegian effort in Afghanistan

From the year 2001 to 2014 over 9000 Norwegian military service members were deployed to Afghanistan (1). Many were severely injured, and 10 persons lost their lives during deployment. The Norwegian government estimates the economic cost of its contribution in Afghanistan to be around 20 billion Norwegian kroner with 11,5 billion for military and 8,4 billion to civilian purposes (1).

1.2 Veterans living conditions

There have been conducted large studies to investigate the health and living conditions of Norwegian veterans. One such study (2) published in 2013 aimed at investigating veteran's health, personal economy, and other parameters relating to quality of life, found that veterans have at least the same level of physical and mental health as the reference group. Normann (2) found that a large portion of veterans are employed and have high incomes. They report having good social relations and friends they can trust. They do voluntary work and contribute to organizations (2).

1.3 Afghanistan survey 2012

The Afghanistan survey (3) is another large cross-sectional study from 2012 which investigated mental health among soldiers who served in Afghanistan from 2001-2011. A total of 4053 veterans responded to the questionnaire. There was a positive correlation between the degree of serious incidents experienced during their deployment and level of stress after returning to Norway. About 6% of the veterans who had experienced a high load of incidents abroad, could probably be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression or substance abuse. The probability for the group with a low load was 3 %. Veterans who experienced a high load of potentially traumatic events, had approximately 4 times the level of PTSD. The report concludes that there is a correlation between reported high load of incidents during service and long-term stress disorders and mental illness. The level of health failure was lower than in a previous study (4) conducted on Norwegian Lebanon veterans, and in foreign studies of veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq. A large majority of Norwegian Afghanistan veterans were in good psychological health on average 4 years after their last contingent in Afghanistan (3).

1.4 International differences

Traumatic events increase the risk of PTSD symptoms (5). Foreign studies reveal that the prevalence of such symptoms vary between nations. Four years after deployment male Norwegian Afghanistan veterans had low levels of mental health problems (6). A large cohort study estimated PTSD prevalence among US Iraq veterans to be between 12-15% (7). British and Danish studies have revealed substantially lower figures. A follow up study of UK Afghanistan and Iraq veterans estimated 4% PTSD (8). A Danish study from 2015 examining Afghanistan veterans 2,5 years after deployment estimated PTSD prevalence at about 9% (9).

This variance is not just between nations, but also between individuals within the nation. Several factors likely contribute to this variance. Such as the specific area of operations, social support and many other variables. The different ways in which an event can be perceived might also be part of the explanation. A deeper understanding of the factors associated with this process may help predict which events are more likely to affect long term health.

1.5 Measuring psychological change

Additional research has been conducted in an attempt to further identify the psychological change experienced by veterans and the stress factors associated with deployment of Norwegian soldiers to Afghanistan.

In 2017 a study (10) was published that attempted to create a scale that captured the continuum from positive to negative psychological changes after trauma. This study used data collected from the Afghanistan survey 2012. The post traumatic change scale (PTCS) allowed participants to report positive, negative or no post traumatic change. The four dimensions of PTCS was self-confidence, interpersonal development, awareness and social adaptability. Post traumatic change refers to how the participants rated themselves within these four dimensions before and after deployment.

Nordstrand et al (10) make a point of saying that positive posttraumatic change, contrary to previous studies was not associated with the increase of symptoms of psychopathology, illustrating the heterogeneity of psychological responses to traumatic events (10). The majority of the sample, 81% reported positive change suggesting that this experience is common.

Furthermore, Nordstrand et al (10) state that the participants military training and preparedness toward combat-related traumatic events may give some explanation of the high degree of positive change. The study (10) cannot answer how acute stress responses relate to later psychological changes because the participants stress response at the time of exposure is not known.

1.6 Danger and non-danger-based stressors

In 2019 a study (5) was published differentiating between danger and non-danger-based stressors and their relation to post traumatic deprecation or growth in Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. It attempted to explore how danger and non-danger-based stressors may influence personal changes in veterans. This study used the data sample from the Afghanistan survey 2012.

War zone related events were used to create two forms of stressor categories; danger and non-danger. The danger-based category included *Personal Threat* while the non-danger-based category involved *Witnessing* and *Moral Challenges*. Witnessing among other things included seeing civilians or fellow soldiers being seriously injured or killed. Moral Challenges involved being part of or witnessing morally reprehensible occurrences.

Nordstrand et al (5) found all the three stressors mentioned above to be significant predictors of post-traumatic stress symptoms while only Witnessing and Moral Challenges were significant predictors of the distress measures such as anxiety, depression and insomnia. Participants who reported post-traumatic deprecation, had significantly higher exposure to Witnessing and Moral challenges when compared to those reporting post-traumatic growth. The number of deployments or the time since last deployment proved to not be significant predictors for any of the psychological distress measures. The participants that reported no change, had less exposure to the three stressors compared to those who reported post-traumatic deprecation. Being exposed to Personal Threat did not significantly differentiate between participants who reported post-traumatic growth and those who reported post-traumatic deprecation (5).

Nordstrand et al's (5) findings indicate that being exposed to non-danger stressors may have a larger impact on symptom expression than exposure to personal danger. Witnessing the death and suffering of others and moral challenges seem to be more associated with distress such as anxiety, depression and insomnia than fear-based situations. Nordstrand et al (5) emphasize

the relevance of expanding the scope of what a traumatic stressor is, highlighting that solely focusing on the danger-based criteria of post-traumatic restricts the view of traumatization.

The study also implies that having experienced danger, is by itself not the best predictor of psychological symptoms associated with trauma.

1.7 Construction of meaning

A study from 2016 (11) examines how veterans construct meaning from their experience. Interviews were conducted with 29 Afghanistan veterans. Gustavsen (11) found that three frameworks were consistently used by the participants to communicate the meaning of their deployment.

(1) a military framework, which generated meaning from the military- and job- related aspects of their service; (2) a societal framework, which allowed them to emphasize the societal value of the endeavour; and (3) a personal framework, for conveying the personal impact of their experience (11, p21).

The study (11) found that the veterans predominantly framed the deployment through a military framework of interpretation. The participants focused on acquiring work experience and also fulfilling their military job duties. Gustavsen (11) states that they consciously separated their job effort from the outcome regarding what was accomplished on the ground. Within this framework it is also noted that a few veterans also framed the experience as meaningful in regard to making a difference, at least in the local area in which they worked (11).

The findings from this study imply that the military framework was the most prevalent used by the participants in finding meaning from their experience.

Overall, the Norwegian literature shows that the majority of Afghanistan veterans report positive post traumatic change after being deployed.

The Afghanistan survey (3) and the study by Nordstrand et al (5) indicate that there is positive correlation between experiencing traumatic events and developing PTSD. The type of incidents experienced by veterans, can be classified under several categories. The degree and type of symptoms expressed by veterans vary with the amount of exposure, and category of experience. As implied by Nordstrand et al (5) exposure to witnessing and moral challenges

seem to provoke post traumatic deprecation to a higher degree than danger. Nordstrand et al (10) indicate that knowledge of the acute stress response might be used to understand how this response relates to later psychological health. Nordstrand et al (10) also imply that military training may be a part of explaining the high degree of reported psychological positive change after deployment. Gustavsen (11) reported that the military framework was the most prevalent for the veterans in constructing meaning from their experience.

Based on the previous research mentioned, there seems to be an association between how a situation is perceived and long-term psychological effects. Qualitative interviews exploring how Afghanistan veterans experience and evaluate or assess combat situations might give insight into the acute stress response. They may provide examples of coping-mechanisms used during combat.

1.8 Stress and coping mechanisms:

According to Lazarus and Folkman:

Psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being (12, p19).

Lazarus and Folkman (13) describe cognitive appraisal and coping as two important phases in this relationship.

According to this theory the individual must appraise the situation as threatening in order to perceive the situation as stressful. Moreover, a situation appraised by others to be potentially dangerous, may not be perceived the same way by the individual who is directly involved in the situation.

Coping was defined by Folkman and Lazarus as referring to “Cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction” (14).

Lazarus and Folkman (12) argued that coping mechanisms served two main functions. Problem-based coping that attempts to manage the problem which causes the stress by attempting to directly intervene or change the situation. Emotion-based coping is aimed at regulating the emotions associated with the stressful situation. There is not an absolute

division between problem and emotion-based coping. Most coping mechanisms can serve both functions (15).

An example of this would be applying problem-based coping to solve a dangerous situation. If the measures to resolve the situation were successful it could also alleviate the emotional stress involved.

1.9 Mind frame

Mind frame is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as: a mental attitude or outlook.

Attitude was defined by Eagly and Chaiken as a “psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (16, p1). How

Norwegian Afghanistan veterans evaluate deployment and combat might relate to how they frame their experience. It is conceivable that a situation might be perceived differently if the individual has a positive outlook rather than a negative one. Many American soldiers that experienced brutality and hardship as prisoners of war in Vietnam did not develop post-traumatic stress disorder. They interpreted the negative experiences of war as proof of their mental strength (17). The subjective outlook on different events may vary depending on the type or character of the situation and this might relate to how veterans cope with their experiences. It might therefore be relevant to gain insight into what the subjective attitude on such situations were among the participants of this study.

1.10 Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to gain insight into the mind frame and coping mechanisms used by Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. Looking at how the soldiers regarded deployment to a warzone and experienced combat. Analysis of the data attempted to describe how they responded to combat situations.

Increased knowledge about how Norwegian Afghanistan veterans perceive and cope with their experiences during deployment might be of use to better understand the effect such events have on long-term psychological health. Stressful events are not exclusive to soldiers during deployment. Insight on how to handle a perceived dangerous or stressful incident might be of use to civilian organizations with personnel in conflict zones.

2 Method and design

2.1 Recruitment strategy

Five interviews were considered to be an adequate number in order to give insight into the research question with an appropriate sampling of participants, aiming for information rich data from informants who have experience with the chosen research topic (18). Further, I did not want to go beyond five because I was unsure how much work was involved in the process.

All five participants are my own former colleagues. I called the first participant because I had spoken to him recently and therefore, he was the first that came to mind. I asked if he was interested in taking part in the study. The response was positive, and we had a conversation about who else might want to participate. The participants we discussed had to meet certain criteria in order to be considered. They had to have been deployed to Afghanistan one or several times. They could no longer work in the military because they then might need external approval to be a participant. This was considered a potential liability to writing the thesis as it might have taken too much time to get approval. Afterwards I gave the other participants we had discussed a call. All of them said yes to take part in the study.

2.2 Participants

At the time of the interview the five participants age ranged from 33 to 40 years old. They began their military career with mandatory service between the age of 18 to 24 years spanning from the year 2002 - 2006. The length of their military career ranged from 6 to 13 years with an average of 8,8 years served. All of the participants had worked full time as soldiers. They had undergone a selection process in order to gain employment. As soldiers they have to agree to be deployed abroad in order to gain employment. All participants had served either 3 or 4 contingents in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2011 but were no longer working in the military.

2.3 Data collection

The data was collected from the five participants using semi-structured qualitative interviews. Qualitative methods are research strategies that are well suited to describe and analyze the traits and characterize the phenomena being studied (18). This form of data collection was considered to provide the necessary freedom to explore the research question and allowed the

participants to talk in detail about incidents they remembered and how they perceived the situation.

An interview guide (*Attachment 1, Interview guide*) was designed by the author and revised by my supervisors. A rehearsal interview, which is not part of the final dataset, was conducted in collaboration with another veteran to improve the quality of the interview. This rehearsal revealed that it could be challenging to maintain the core structure of the interview. Thus, in the middle of the interview I started to direct the conversation more firmly towards what I foresaw as the relevant parts. I imagined that if the interview spiraled too far off topic, it would become very long and large portions of the material could be of little relevance. After the rehearsal I listened to the recording and realized that many of the things that were said during these perceived detours in the conversation, were more relevant than I had originally expected. I also got the impression that the rehearsal participant needed time in order to remember the incidents in question. In that regard the conversation yielded more details after the thirty-minute mark. On that basis I made the decision to expand the interview length from the original forty minutes to “the time it took” within a two-hour time frame, focusing more on how long the participant had something to say instead of having a strict time limit. Because of the knowledge that relevant things might come where I did not expect them, I allowed the participant to speak freely as much as they wanted, never interrupting them. The overall direction of the conversation remained the same as originally intended.

All the interviews were conducted in Norwegian. The interviews lasted from one to two hours. It was not possible for the investigator to travel to the participants’ location, and all interviews were conducted on the phone with audio only. This meant that facial expressions and body language were not part of the information gathered.

The interviews were recorded using an Olympus digital voice recorder provided by The Arctic University of Norway. The recordings were deleted after the transcription was complete.

2.4 Transcribing

The recordings were transcribed into text. A few times words were not audible from the recording, and in a few instances, this meant that the meaning of the sentence was unclear or lost entirely. These sentences are not part of the final project.

In some cases, text had to be changed because it identified the participant or another person. The participants could mention other soldiers or family members by name. I considered it unethical to keep this in the transcripts as it could be used to directly identify the person the participant was talking about. All references to names were changed to generalize while attempting to remain true to the meaning portrayed by the participant. For example: “Name went up the hill to cover his sector towards the east” was changed to: A fellow soldier went up the hill to cover his sector towards the east.”

The friendly fire incident as mentioned by one participant was transcribed without deleting or changing text. It did not refer to names but implied in a less direct manner who did what during the incident. I have had a conversation with three people who have previously worked as military leaders in the same unit as the participants. We have discussed if mentioning this is a possible breach of duty of confidentiality. We all agree that this event may be presented in the final product, and that it is wise for ethical and legal reasons to leave out exactly who did what during the incident.

All accent was transcribed to standard written language in order to improve readability. In my understanding none of the participants had strong accents or used language that lost its meaning when transcribed in the standard written language Norwegian Bokmål.

Waitsounds/breaks and confirming listening sounds were not transcribed. The tone of voice or the speed in which they spoke was not transcribed.

2.5 Analysis

The original plan was to compare coping strategies before, during and after military service. This was not possible to achieve because of personal reasons concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. The transcripts from all the participants were considered sufficient to provide the necessary foundation for the current research questions. It should, however, be noted that the interviews were conducted with the original research question in mind.

Transcripts were analyzed in their original language (Norwegian). The quotes were translated to English from the Norwegian transcripts.

Thematic analysis is a method to identify and analyze patterns within a dataset. It is used to organize and describe the data. The result of this process is a condensed and organized version of the data (19).

Thematic analysis was chosen because there were specific elements that were of interest in the analysis and because I attempted to explain and interpret data in the light of coping theory. This is reflected in the coding of the interviews. All information regarding incidents and coping mechanisms, were specifically identified and given a code. The same applies to how the participants frame events. In this way the coding attempts to accurately represent what is being said by the participants in relation to the research question.

The six step process as described by Braun and Clark was used in the analysis (19).

- **Familiarizing yourself with the data:** Reading the data several times and noting initial ideas.
- **Generating codes:** The first step in text condensation. Coding interesting features across the whole dataset
- **Searching for themes:** Attempt to organize codes into potential themes.
- **Reviewing themes:** Assess whether or not codes fit into their assigned themes.
- **Defining and naming themes:** Further analysis to refine the specifics of each theme.
- **Producing the report:** Selection of relevant and compelling examples that illustrate the point in relation to the research question.

2.6 Ethics

The project handled data capable of identifying the participants and other people in relation to them and used audio recording to store data provisionally. The project was submitted for review at the Norwegian center for research data (NSD). The project is not defined as research within the bounds of regional committee for medical and health science research ethics (REK) and is therefore not submitted to this board for review. The reason for this is that the purpose of the project is not about gaining new knowledge about disease and health in a medical perspective. The project was approved by NSD who found the project to be lawful under the personal data act.

The participants received oral and written information about the project and a consent form (*Attachment 2, Consent form*) via email. All participants had to sign the consent form agreeing to take part in the project. This was done under the premise that they would not be identified. They were informed that the project was voluntary, and that they could still withdraw their consent even after the consent form had been signed.

2.6.1 Anonymity:

All five veterans included are referred to as male regardless of their gender. They are given aliases V1 through V5. V meaning veteran followed by the number given to identify them. This to ensure a high degree of anonymity. The participant's colleagues might be able to identify them, but to the general public, and anyone not directly involved in the situations described, the veterans will retain their anonymity.

2.7 Preconceptions

2.7.1 Motivation

I am a veteran from Afghanistan, and I have personal experience with combat situations. My interest for psychological health among Afghanistan veterans comes from this experience. After my military career I have often thought about how we managed to succeed in those life-threatening situations. I felt a growing interest for of how such events are handled. How to persevere in the face of adversity and hopefully remain psychologically healthy afterwards. Such knowledge cannot be extracted exclusively from statistical analysis of veteran's psychological health. In order to gain insight into how the stressors relate to later psychological health it may be useful to have knowledge of the response related to the specific incident. This is not a theoretical phenomenon for me as it relates directly to myself and my colleagues. My motivation was to contribute with knowledge that could improve veterans' health.

2.7.2 Theoretical background

Before I made a decision to do this study, I was familiar with the studies described in the introduction. The general living conditions and mental health of Afghanistan veterans had been investigated in these large studies and I aligned my understanding with these findings. My interest was closely linked to the findings in studies investigating post-traumatic change and which stressors predicting long term psychological health. The results from these studies reveal a more diverse picture of what constitutes a stressor and indicate that psychological change is a continuum ranging from positive to negative. I was interested in the complexity of psychological change and in exploring personal experiences of stressors. To my knowledge no previous studies have interviewed Afghanistan veterans with the aim to describe how they experience and cope with combat, and what they find stressful about different types of combat related situations.

2.7.3 Familiarity with the field

I have myself worked together with the participants included in the study and have been deployed to Afghanistan with them. Consequently, I am familiar with the culture and customs of their military unit and was part of the ethos of the unit. My impression was that the unit aspired to professionalism from the military perspective. Many had years of experience from previous deployments. The explicit motto in the unit was “train as you fight”. After every firefight the soldier had a debrief to talk about what had happened, how they perceived the incident to unfold and what they felt in the situation. During these sessions the soldier was expected to be honest. This was regarded as a sign of professionalism. At the same time, it was accepted that the experiences from an incident could differ between the team members.

2.7.4 My combat experience

My own experience involves being fired upon, having bullets plowing into the sand next to me and feeling the fear of making a mistake that would result in the death of my colleagues or innocent civilians. I have witnessed an attack that killed my colleague. I have driven on the dirt roads under the threat of improvised explosive devices, knowing that the vehicle would not withstand such an explosion. I remember I was glad that I did not make any grave mistakes. At the time, I had a feeling that such an event could have a negative impact on my psychological wellbeing. I recall the first firefight as stressful although I was not in direct danger, but the subsequent firefights were perceived as a relief of stress. It was often more stressful to wait for the enemy to attack than the actual fight itself. When we were able to apply our training to solve the task at hand, I felt more at ease. During some severe firefights I felt fear and responsibility for my colleagues and responded by suppressing my emotions. However, some firefights I perceived to be exhilarating. At the beginning of my career I had a strong wish to be deployed to Afghanistan. A few months after my last deployment my contract ended, and I did not reenlist.

I have used this experience and my familiarity with the field when preparing the interview guide and when conducting the interviews. However, I tried to have in mind my preconceptions and used preferably open and neutral questions. For example, I asked about what the participants themselves perceived to be stressful and allowed them to elaborate on this. I then asked how they perceived to cope with the situation. I frequently summarized and asked if I had understood them correctly in an attempt to increase intersubjectivity between the participant and myself. If I had misunderstood, they were given the opportunity to clarify

as to ensure a shared understanding. From personal experience and from previous studies of Afghanistan veterans I have a preconception that being in danger oneself is not necessarily perceived to be most stressful.

2.7.5 Making way for variations of experience

Combat situations require that the military training is applied in order to minimize the risk to the personnel involved and enhance the probability of a desired outcome. I found it likely that the participants would say they handled many of the events according to their military training. This is obvious as soldiers are expected to apply their military training in response to attacks from hostile forces. I attempted to get the participants to talk about the diversity of experiences, from the benign to the horrifying. Human beings are not robots and may experience unforeseen events with the potential to overwhelm their capacity to cope, regardless of training or preparedness. Thus, I wished to explore if there were situations where the participants could not apply their training, or in other ways felt overwhelmed. I regard this as important because it could reveal under which circumstances they felt stressed, and how they perceived to cope. I believe there could be relevant knowledge gained from what they perceived challenging. It is also possible that other elements than those I had foreseen were regarded as stressful. I therefore felt that the interviews needed an amount of freedom necessary to explore these possibilities without time constraint. The ability to speak about challenging incidents during debriefing sessions contributed to an expectation that the participants would attempt to answer my questions accordingly. I expected the participants to be motivated for their initial deployment. However, I was unsure which incidents the participants remembered as most stressful. Nor did I know what it is in these incidents that they perceive stressful. I also expected there to be individual differences in their experiences, even within the same events.

3 Results

3.1 Subjective perception of deployment:

The perception and attitude towards being deployed to a warzone was discussed by the participants. They shared their initial reactions and perception of the deployment. The general attitude in the military unit in regard to deploying abroad was also mentioned by two participants.

Veteran 3: “I wanted to be deployed, it was exciting. It was a good first deployment. Many routines, everything had a nice taste to it. The next time you deployed there were many things you had done before. The process of saying goodbye to your family, flying to Afghanistan, the air that meets you. I had already done those things. You didn’t have to think about it so much. The second deployment was much easier of course.”

V3 describes wanting to be deployed abroad and refers to it as exciting. This an expression of the mind frame he had at the time of the first deployment. He refers to the second deployment as easier based on a sense of familiarity with the situation and environment. This might infer that there were challenging events during the first deployment that was perceived to be easier to handle on the second deployment.

Veteran 1: “It was a lot of fun. It was a perfect first deployment. I was there for seven weeks, in addition to a week of quarantine because we got e-coli infection. We drove escorts and went on patrols, it was nice. Other than that, it was regular camp security duty.”

The deployment is described as a lot of fun, indicating a positive experience. Driving escort and going on patrols is expressed in a positive light. Performing camp security is mentioned as regular duty, indicating this might have been perceived as a boring or dull task compared to going on patrol or driving escort.

V1 recalled being told that he was chosen for redeployment.

Veteran 1: “The message that we were to deploy came on short notice. Everyone cheered when we were told that we got the mission. Everyone wanted it. Then it became clear that not everyone was to be deployed. I was chosen and I was very happy. Then I realized I had to call my mother and tell her; it was not a pleasant conversation.”

He describes the general attitude among his colleagues and himself as cheerful. The fact that V1 and most of his colleagues had been deployed before show a consistency in the mental frame to getting deployed. The conversation with his mother, informing her that he was to be redeployed illustrates the potential mental burden deployment can pose for the soldier’s family members.

V4 has previously been deployed to a different area of operations. In this citation he referred to deploying to Afghanistan for the first time.

Veteran 4: “It was exciting to be deployed. I still remember when we were called in to get the message. Our commander asked if we wanted to hear the news. He had a grin on his face. He said we are going to Afghanistan. Everyone shouted in joy. All of us were happy to be deployed.

The feeling of excitement towards deployment is reiterated. The commander’s reaction and expression indicate that he knew what kind of reception this message would get from the soldiers. If this was not the case, his facial expression and method of delivery might seem out of place, grinning and building suspense while delivering horrible news. This again indicates that the positive attitude towards deployment is not only present for the informants, but rather generalized in the unit in which the informants worked.

Summary:

The prospect of going to war is framed as something positive. This way of thinking about deploying abroad is shared among the participants. This mind frame shows consistency over time as V3, and V1 express this view in regard to redeploying to Afghanistan, while the other participant had previously been deployed elsewhere. It is also insinuated that this mind frame is prevalent in the military unit in which they worked. Further it indicates that aspects of deploying can be perceived easier as you gain familiar with the process and the environment, and that active tasks such as patrols or driving escort are regarded as more fulfilling than other duties.

One participant indicated the potential mental burden deployment poses for family members of the deployed soldiers. He said that he remembered he had to call his mom, indicating he knew in advance it would not be a good conversation. This topic was not further discussed but is worth mentioning because it addresses a conversation many veterans need to have before deploying abroad. It did not seem to have had a negative impact on the excitement V1 felt when received the message that he was to be part of the unit redeploying to Afghanistan.

3.2 The first firefight

Three of the participants described how they felt about the first firefight with the enemy. They spoke about the mind frame they had going into the situation and how they experienced the situation. One of the participants revealed how he thought about the first firefights in light of having experienced more severe incidents during later contingents later.

V1 and V4 talked about the first engagement with the enemy.

Veteran 1: “It was the first. It was very exciting, but I didn’t contribute directly to that firefight. It was mostly mortar and combat vehicles. It was a soft start to put it that way.”

Veteran 4: “It was liberating. You had for a longer time period waited for an enemy engagement. When it finally happened, it was a good feeling. The only bad thing was that I and my colleague held a sector in the opposite direction from where the engagement took place. That part of it was shit, but it was good that we got to be a part of it. I had waited a long time for it to happen. It is the first time someone has fired towards me, towards us.”

The first firefight with the enemy is described as liberating and very exciting. V4 describes not being able to participate as negative, and that he had waited a long time for it to happen. He expresses the desire to be in a firefight. This shows that he did not only wish to be deployed, but also wanted to actively participate in a firefight.

V3 talked about the first time he was in a firefight.

Veteran 3: “I almost have to say that it was a relief. You don’t know how you react in a situation before you have been in it. You can train, train, train. It’s not until you are in that situation where you get bullets hurled at you by someone who wants to kill you that you know how you will react. It was liberating that I reacted calmly, in control, all the training came into play. The mental training was done correctly. Exactly that, the first contact with the enemy, it was liberating. I got verified that the training I have done was correct and that I am who I think I am.”

The first firefight is perceived as a relief of stress. It is expressed as a wish to validate that the training and preparations have made him capable of handling the situation. How the participant perceives himself acting in the situation seems to be linked to how he views himself.

He goes on to talk about the first enemy engagements retrospectively, from the standpoint of having experienced more severe firefights in later contingents.

Veteran 3: “The enemy engagements we had in 2008 we just called harassment fire. It was nothing more than to show that we are here. These small contacts that lasted half an hour to an hour was just harassment. Annoying. When you have engagements with the enemy that

lasts seven to eight hours with large maneuvers in an urban environment, range of fire spanning 270 to 360 degrees, then you are in contact. Then you are in high spirits.”

After having experienced more severe engagements with the enemy, the initial firefight is described as annoying harassment fire. The participant frames the earliest firefights in a less severe manner retrospectively when comparing it to later engagements. He portrays one such lengthy and severe engagement with the enemy, describing how it felt. The last sentence of the citation is hard to translate directly from Norwegian while still retaining its original meaning. You are in high spirits, meaning happy and excited, also inferring that the engagement is going well. It does not only refer to himself, but also implies that this feeling is shared among the group of soldiers.

Summary:

The participants describe the first firefight as a positive experience and a sense of relief. This shows consistency with the mental frame expressed earlier, that deployment to a warzone is something they want to experience. The wish to actively participate in the firefight further reiterates this mind frame.

The positive framing of the experience may be tied to the feeling of relief. The confirmation that they are able to perform their duties during a firefight might provide the sense of relief. This in turn might contribute to the positive framing of the event.

It appears that for one of the participants the act of coping in a subjectively good manner in combat is closely tied to how he views himself. V3 describes the feeling of being in a severe firefight as positive, both to himself and the unit. It is interesting to note that none of the participants described the initial firefight as a negative experience. The sense of excitement, relief and positive framing of the event may be part of the explanation for this.

When looking back on less severe firefights, they are described as annoying harassment fire. It may be the case that having experienced severe firefights, affect how the participant portrays less severe incidents.

3.3 The death of a colleague

Four of the participants witnessed the attack that resulted in the death of a colleague. The first vehicle got struck by an improvised explosive device (IED). The vehicle was a small tank referred to as CV90. They describe the incident and how they reacted in the situation.

Veteran 1: “I was in the first vehicle behind the CV90. I felt the pressure on my face. I instantly realized it was an IED. I reported on the comm: “contact IED”. Then I started firing on likely targets as we were supposed to. It’s a bit, its surreal to hear that it has happened. You hear that he has died but you don’t allow it to get to you because you have something to do. I had another colleague from a different branch of the military in the car with me. He was probably affected the most of all in the company by the situation. I had to put him to work by handing me ammunition and water bottles. It was actually fine because then I had something to do other than firing the weapon. This event is undoubtedly the one you will remember forever from that trip.”

After the initial blast V1 puts the military principles of combat into practice, performing the duty required of him, not allowing himself to be derived away from the task at hand. The emotional impact was suppressed in order to do the necessary job. Delegating work to the other colleague in the vehicle gave the other individual an opportunity to do a practical task, thereby participating actively in the task at hand. In doing so V1 also gave himself additional tasks to perform. This helps him keep his mind occupied, and not think about the death of his colleague.

V2 recalled the incident and share his reflections.

Veteran 2: “We had a lot of firefights, many of them went surprisingly well. The training worked and the personnel worked very well. It was not until we lost one of our colleagues in an IED attack that I got to experience that not all the training worked as well as it should. I was the first on site when we went to get him out of the vehicle. We have trained a lot on what to do when someone is injured, but not when they actually die. It came as a shock to me. I had worked in the emergency services and I was used to seeing dead people. The reflex on the eye is the last thing you lose, he was gone when I came to him. I was initially determined that this would end well. When that was no longer an opportunity, I felt a void opening up, I had no training to fall back on to help me. It is a situation I thought a lot about afterwards. What could I do better in this situation? What has to change during training back home so that

this does not happen again? I always try to evaluate what I did well and not well. I sat down and analyzed what had gone wrong and what things I need to train more on, so I don't fuck up again."

He describes proper training as the foundation needed to cope with the situation. In this event the lack of training and familiarity with the specific situation leaves V2 without an immediate strategy. This came as a shock to him and is described as a void opening up. When he cannot improve the situation by applying his training, he perceives that he is left with no apparent tools to deal with the event. He refers to the immediate lack of a strategy as "fuck up". This implies that it is important for V2 to be able to master the situation in a practical manner. After the event he analyzed the chain of events in order to come up with a strategy to improve, showing how important proper training and preparation is perceived to be.

V3 describes the attack that killed his colleague and how he reacted to the incident. Black zone refers to stress induced pulse frequency above 175 beats per minute, where the individual experiences progressive loss of cognitive processing ability (20).

Veteran 3: "The first thing I saw was a giant cloud and parts flying. I screamed: No, for what felt like a long time, but wasn't. After a short silence the commander instructed me to maneuver the vehicle into its sector. I felt an excruciating rage. It was a need for revenge, everything that moved should die. I calmed down quickly, but there was a minute or two where I felt like it would boil over. I think I was close to black zone, but again the mental training we had earlier in Norway, the previous deployments, smaller and more severe enemy engagements. The sum of those things made you think that this is not the time, nor the place for this. Just put it away and start maneuvering so we can take control of the blast site. Its back to being a soldier, there was no room for anything else. I took all thoughts that did not revolve around my task and put them away. We had to sweep the area for mines and get a medic on site. We pulled out the wreckage of the CV90, there was to be nothing left for them to celebrate, no propaganda. Just get it home."

When the incident occurs. V3 is confronted with strong feelings of anger and express his emotions. He attributes his training and experience for managing to suppress the emotions and continue doing his duties. His ability to cope with his initial emotions enabled him to revert back to solving the task using the practical application of his training. Pulling out the wreckage meant there was to be nothing left for the enemy to celebrate. This illustrates that

even if the combat vehicle is non-functional, the unit would not allow it to be left on the battlefield as a symbol of victory for the enemy. This indicates that even if a colleague is lost in combat, the unit may not define this as being defeated. Instead it seemed to be important that they denied the enemy the opportunity for a propaganda victory.

V4 remembered the incident and described the initial reaction.

Veteran 4: “I remember the incident on the twenty-fifth of January. The driver started shouting. Even if I felt the same way I had to step in and say that we need to keep focus on our jobs and leave the other things for later. It was a responsibility I had envisioned that I would take. And I found use for it.”

This citation shows V4 initially experienced strong emotions. The emotions were suppressed in order to function properly. He took responsibility for the mission and assisted in directing the unit towards the practical task. He had prior to the incident envisioned that this was a responsibility he would take, and it is likely that this helped him during the event. By suppressing his emotions, it allowed him to help the unit to fulfill its duty. It also served to assist the other members of his team to succeed in suppressing their own emotions.

Summary:

In this incident the participants applied their military training when solving the practical aspect of the situation. When confronted with strong emotions, they suppressed them in order to complete the mission. This emphasizes the importance of being able to handle emotions in order to complete the mission. V4 helped his colleague to suppress his emotions and focus on the practical tasks. This may have helped the unit as a whole to complete its mission. It may be the case that the ability of the participants to control their emotions is necessary to perform their duty.

V1 delegated work to his colleague thereby giving this individual the opportunity to participate in the incident with practical task. It also helped him to not think about the fact that one of his fellow soldiers had been killed. The reliance on preparation and training both mentally and practically, as well as experience is emphasized in order to cope with the situation.

The unit removes the wreckage of the CV90 after the attack, denying the enemy a propaganda victory. It seems that even if a colleague is lost in battle, the unit does not define this as being defeated.

Interestingly V2 states that he “fucked up” when referring to the lack of training that prevented him from finding an instant solution to the situation. He expresses the lack of training towards this specific situation as a feeling of having failed, even when proper training could not have saved his colleague. The level of training and preparedness seems to be more important to determine the feeling of success in the event than the actual outcome of the situation.

3.4 No plan survives the confrontation with reality

The participants recalled several severe and stressful situations. How the events were perceived varied to a large degree. The incidents illustrate that no matter how much training and preparation the soldiers do, things can still go wrong. They describe how they handled the incidents.

V3 talked about a severe firefight. They unit was driving into a small town while taking fire from the enemy.

Veteran 3: “We drove up the hill and positioned ourselves between a couple of houses to cover a sector. Then a hundred and fifty meters in front of the car an enemy pop up and fires a rocket propelled grenade. I see the projectile or rocket coming straight towards our vehicle. It passes over the car with a one and a half meters margin. My heart stopped for a beat or two. I yell to the gunner on top that it was a close call. To which he replies: ‘How do you think it was for me? I have my head above the roof.’ Then we felt a bit invincible and returned fire to where the rocket propelled grenade was coming from. Held our sector, everything went smooth. The team dismounted the vehicle and cleared the town. We were in high spirits.”

V3 felt as if his heart stopped when he realized what was about to happen. This description indicates that he experienced a high level of stress. He then expresses his emotions to his colleague manning the gun on top of the vehicle and receives a jesting answer. His teammates use of humor may reveal that he also experienced this as stressful. Surviving what was perceived as an imminent threat might have produced the feeling of invincibility. The description of how the unit went on to handle the situation, applying principles of military combat emphasizes that this is an integral part of how the event is remembered. It may also be

directly related to how the participant coped with the situation. He again uses the same expression as before by stating we were in high spirits.

V5 recalled the situation he remembered as the most stressful from his deployments to Afghanistan. Blue on blue is NATO terminology for friendly fire.

Veteran 5: “What I remember as most stressful, it was one incident. The enemy fired on us during the night with curved trajectory weapons. I woke up to a hail of tracer bullets around us. I was the top gunner on the machine gun. We got in the vehicle to flank their position. As we attacked from a distance of fifty to seventy meters we got attacked by our own forces. They shot up our car and I had several near misses around my head. They hit our comms and a small fire ensued in the back of the vehicle. Then they opened fire with a machine gun. We were being subjected to friendly fire from seven hundred meters. We lost our comms. We had to drive up on a ridge to get reception on the handheld comms. The friendly fire took out our tires and I had to duck down on the floor. We sent a message reporting blue on blue with the handheld comms, and then it stopped. We continued with our shot up car and flanked four motorcycles with two personnel on each of them which we then took out. I shot two of the motorcycles carrying two enemies on each of them.”

The events and decisions made in this situation may require further explanation in order to be understood by the reader.

While subjected to both enemy and friendly fire, the unit took additional risk to drive up on a ridge in order to get reception on the handheld communication device. The intention was to convey the message that friendly fire was taking place. After they had succeeded in sending the message to their colleagues, they proceeded to continue the mission, taking out several enemies.

This incident is described as the most stressful of V5’s military career. He uses descriptive language to illustrate how the situation unfolded, indicating the perceived importance of how they practically handled the situation. The application of their military training in an attempt to complete the mission seems to have subjected the unit to more danger than if they had removed themselves from the line of fire. The decision to drive up on the ridge seems to be based on what is perceived to be the best course of action in order to complete the mission, regardless of the extra danger involved. This may reflect the perceived importance of

completing the designated task, even if it involves additional risk to the personnel carrying it out.

V5 talks about the following day of the incident described above. The military convoy was driving through a town when one of the vehicles got hit by a rocket propelled grenade.

Veteran 5: “It was a pretty stressful night and it escalated in the morning after we had changed tires and repaired our comms. In the first town we drove through, one of our vehicles got hit by a rocket propelled grenade from twenty meters and an ensuing ambush. We had to shoot our way out of that town, and I remember thinking we had lost personnel when the rocket hit. I actually perceived that as more stressful than the other situations I have been in myself. If you understand. I feel that when I can be in a situation and act and take control of the situation myself. I have experienced that from when I was young that I have always been good at it. It is a lot worse for me to know that my friends are in a situation like that.”

V5 seemingly contradicts himself stating that this event was more stressful than the previous one. Drawing on his own experience from when he was younger, he explains that it is easier if he can be in the situation, act and take control himself.

He goes on to respond to a follow up question about what he perceives as stressful with not being in the situation and managing it himself.

“The first thing I felt is that time went very slow, we came in full throttle to provide backup to this vehicle. We had to tow it out of there. We had to shoot ourselves out of there three hundred and sixty degrees more or less. The time we spent approaching the damaged vehicle, even though it was just fifty meters seemed a tiresome process. It felt like it took longer than it did. Arriving and wondering if you had lost your colleagues, that was stress. It was not very pleasant, but it went well. The rocket propelled grenade hit the back of the vehicle in the trunk. It hit five centimeters from a few ammunition canisters for the recoilless launcher. If it had hit there, the whole vehicle would have exploded.”

V5 felt as if time slowed down while he wondered if his colleagues had been killed. He was not able to immediately act to resolve the situation but seems to have been left with time to think about possible negative outcomes of the situation. He reflects on what could have happened if the events unfolded slightly different, emphasizing the small margins that dictated, if his colleagues survived or not.

Veteran 2 remembers one incident where he made a wrong decision and led his team in the opposite direction of what was intended. He intended to take his team out of a combat situation, instead he ended up leading them towards the enemy.

V2: "I will be honest and say that I have done things that are chillingly bad. There are things I still think about and they stress me to this day. One time I took my team one hundred and eighty degrees the wrong way when we were pulling out of a combat situation. We nearly walked into the enemy. We were the only team in front of everyone else. That is probably the worst thing I have ever done in my military career, but these things happen. You have to be prepared that you will do things that are shit. You are going to do things that are bad sometimes. You have to take it there and then try to do better the next time."

V2: "When I found out that I had gone the wrong way, I didn't have time to do anything other than pull back the personnel as quickly as possible. When I came back, I had to thoroughly analyze what I had done that had led me to go that wrong."

V2 recalled one of the worst things he has done in his military career. When he realizes that he has led his team the wrong direction, he resolves the situation by changing the direction in which they are heading. He explains that there was no time for anything other than pulling the team back. After reassessing the situation, a decision was made and put in to play immediately. He intervened to directly handle the situation, and it seems that when he realized the mistake unfolding, his emotions warning him of danger may have helped him make a quick decision to pull back without second guessing this decision. He states that you have to be prepared to do bad things, in this case referring to bad decisions. This might indicate that he had, to some degree prepared in advance for the possibility of making a severe mistake.

He went on to describe the conversation with his unit following this incident.

"I took it with my team that this is the ugliest thing I had done. You should be able to expect more from me. Then we worked through it together. There was not much more to be said than sorry I fucked up. It was my fault and mine alone. There were probably several things I could have done to prevent it, but before I was in the situation, I had not done them. Then I rather have to try to prevent it from happening again."

“The others took it well. Most of them said that they should have realized it themselves, but the fact is that it is my responsibility. It’s nice that they, as long as things don’t go horribly wrong people are quite forgiving, because everyone makes mistakes sooner or later.”

He claimed his responsibility for the incident, acknowledging his mistake. In doing so he remains true to the event and himself, keeping his integrity and maintaining the respect of his unit. The members of the unit acknowledged that they also should have realized what was happening, and thereby admit fault as well. In doing so they are able to assess and evaluate the event in order to improve their performance in the future. This may also help them to cope with the emotions associated with the incident.

Summary:

Severe firefights have been framed by the participants as both positive and negative. V3 described the unit as being in high spirits while under heavy fire. V5 found it to be severely stressful when he was unsure if he had lost his colleagues after the vehicle was struck by a rocket propelled grenade. He mentioned that it is easier if he himself is able to be in the situation and act as opposed to his friends and colleagues. He also referred to this as something he has experienced before when he was younger.

V3 described that he felt as his heart had stopped when he realized the imminent danger of the incoming attack. He and his team members felt invincible after having nearly been hit by a rocket propelled grenade. In the same firefight humor was used by another team member. Perhaps as a means of reducing or releasing the tension of the situation. In retelling the incident, V3 emphasized how they handled the situation, indicating that this is an important part of how events are remembered. How they went on to solve the situation may also be related to how they coped emotionally. This point also seems to apply to V5 as he talked about witnessing his colleagues being attacked.

All participants were able to complete their duties regardless of their initial emotional response. They all went on to attempt to solve the situation in a practical manner within a relatively short timeframe. This indicates that they have a strong desire to solve the situation using their practical military training. This seems to be the case regardless of the personal danger involved. The last point is illustrated by V5 when his unit took additional risk in attempting to convey a message of friendly fire. The same point can be made when V5’s unit drove their vehicle in to support their colleagues who had been attacked by a rocket propelled

grenade. V3's unit continued with the mission after nearly being struck by a rocket propelled grenade, again indicating that personal risk does not seem to deter the participants from this course of action.

V2 was able to remain in the situation and make a new decision when he realized his mistake. He did not ponder upon his new decision and his emotions might have helped him to quickly decide what to do next. He says that you have to be prepared to do bad things, indicating that he might have been prepared for such an event to happen. When talking to his team he claimed responsibility for the incident. It is likely that this helped him maintain the respect of his team members. The other members of his unit did not show reluctance to admit fault. This level of honesty and integrity might have helped the unit to cope with the emotions associated with the incident.

4 Discussion

The participants mentioned several experiences that relate to how they cope with the different combat situations. Many factors may be relevant to the process of coping, and it is important to consider the different aspects mentioned by the participants. In both the first and second part of the discussion I debate the results. In the first part I elaborate and reflect on possible interpretations and implications of the participants statements. In the second part I compare and discuss the findings of this study to previous research. In the third part I discuss the design and research method.

4.1 Different aspects of coping

4.1.1 The first firefight

V4 described that not being able to directly participate in the firefight, was perceived as something negative. He had waited a long time for it to happen and was glad to be a part of it. It seems that the wish to experience combat was genuine. This was also reiterated by the other participants.

None of the participants described the initial firefight as something negative. The feeling of excitement, relief and a positive framing of the experience may be part of this explanation. It may be that the event would have been framed or remembered differently if the participants had perceived themselves to fail in their military duties.

The severity of the incident may also be a factor. V1 refers to the firefight as a soft start. V3 mentioned that when compared to more severe incidents that happened later, the initial firefights were referred to as annoying harassment fire. It seems that how the initial firefight is framed might be dependent on later events. The event was categorized as harassment fire, indicating a low threat level. It may also mean that the participant regarded the enemy as disorganized, not being able to mount a strong attack.

None of the participants mention any moral challenges. Nor did they mention the possible impact this firefight may have had on the enemy combatants. The ability to return fire when being fired upon is also within the legal framework of the law. The participants might have felt that what happened was justified, and this might have been a part of how they frame their experience. If the incident was perceived to involve illegality, morally reprehensible actions or brutality against an innocent third party this might have produced distress symptoms such as anxiety or depression as indicated by Nordstrand et al (5). The absence of these factors may be relevant to explain how they perceived their experience.

4.1.2 The death of a colleague

All participants describe their course of action in the aftermath of the attack. The way they practically handled the event are examples of problem-based coping. Taking direct action to intervene in the situation. When confronted with strong emotions, these were suppressed in order to complete the mission and represents emotion-based coping. The participants thus applied both mechanisms of coping. They responded in a similar fashion indicating some conformity to how they react. They have all had similar military training, and this might help explain this observation. Suppression of emotions during the incident does not seem to prevent them from discussing it afterwards. If there is a stigma related to discussing emotions among soldiers, it is not evident from these interviews. This may indicate that the participants are comfortable in discussing their emotions. It is however also possible that there are more severe psychological reactions that are not revealed because the participants fear stigmatization.

The participants mentioned the importance of training in order to function properly in the situation. V3 said that his training and experience helped him to suppress his emotions. This indicates that he holds mental training and experience in high regard. V2 mentioned that he analyzed his actions in order to do better the next time. V2's statements regarding how he views his actions, will be discussed later. V4 initially experienced strong emotions but went

on to assist his colleagues in their emotional coping. He specifies that he had envisioned himself taking this responsibility in advance, and that he found use for it during the incident. It seems that training is perceived to be an essential tool in order to cope with the situation. Mental training seems to have an immediate effect on how the team went on to act. By effectively coping with the incident himself, V4 was able to assist his colleague to cope emotionally, and the ability to effectively apply emotion-based coping seems to have been essential for the team to carry out its duty. In this case, the seconds it took before emotion-based coping was effective seems to have affected how quickly the team were able to apply problem-based coping and indicates the presence of a potential delay before the problem could be solved practically. If this delay is sufficiently long, it may have profound negative consequences in combat.

When V4 helped his colleague to suppress his emotions and focus on the mission. This seems to have produced a shift from emotion-based to problem-based coping. V1 delegated work to his colleague thereby giving this individual the opportunity to directly participate. It is possible this may have produced the same shift in coping mechanisms as explained above. V1 mentioned that his colleague was probably the most affected by all in the company, and that he had to put him to work. Interestingly, V1 says that this is fine because then he had something to do besides firing the weapon. This may refer to himself wanting to be occupied with work as a means of not thinking about the death of his colleague. He does not state the exact reason why he had to put his colleague to work. It is possible that he felt that it was important to include his colleague, even if the colleague's contribution may not be needed to complete V1's task. It is not obvious why V1 chose to include his colleague, but the implications suggest that it might have had a positive effect on himself and his colleague. V1 does not mention military training or preparedness as reasons for doing what he did. If military training or experience was not part of the reason for his actions, then this might indicate that he was not taught this course of action directly through training. Perhaps it was his personal intuition that made him think that it was best to be occupied with a practical task during such an incident. It may also be that he felt he had to include his colleague. By delegating a task to his colleague, he may have given him an opportunity to feel that he contributed to the mission. This ability to contribute might have been important as it could allow the colleague to perform a perceived meaningful task.

The wreckage of the CV90 was towed back to camp. This was mentioned by V3 as a means of denying the enemy a propaganda victory. A colleague had been killed in battle, but the

actions taken, indicate that the military unit does not seem view this as defeat. This action seems to go beyond simply winning a firefight. The decision to remove the wreckage might have been seen as important in terms of morale, not letting the event be framed as defeat. It may also have had a more emotional purpose, not wanting to see the enemy celebrate on the wreckage where a colleague died. V3 did not raise criticism towards this decision, nor did any of the other participants. The decision to remove the wreckage seems to be important to how they regard and remember this event. Removing the wreckage also allowed the participants to be occupied with something practical and work towards a shared goal. In doing so it may have helped them generate positive meaning from the incident. It might also have given the soldiers less time to think about the implications of what had transpired and perhaps assisted them in suppressing the emotions related to the incident. Remaining for a prolonged amount of time on the location in which the blast happened, may also have had a symbolic effect. It may be that not retreating or removing themselves from the battlefield in the face of adversity is important to how the participants view themselves. V3 indicated earlier that how he perceived himself to react in a firefight, related to how he viewed himself. With this in mind the decision to remain on location, and act in the aftermath of the blast could be important to how V3 and the other soldiers regarded themselves.

V2 was shocked when he realized that his training had not prepared him for the event of a colleague being killed and not only injured. He stated that he “fucked up” when referring to the lack of training that prevented him from finding an instant problem-based solution to the situation. This despite of the fact that his colleague could not have been saved by his actions. The outcome of the event, whether or not his colleague died, seems irrelevant to how he perceived his own effort in the moment. This might indicate that what is perceived as negative, is that he was unable to immediately act in accordance with proper military training. It may indicate that he separated his measurement of personal success from the outcome of the situation. It is also possible that a colleague being killed or injured was considered as inevitable or unchangeable, and therefore should not determine how the participant regards his own effort.

4.1.3 No plan survives the confrontation with reality

None of the participants describe the same stressful event. How they perceived the incidents range from positive to negative. V3 described the incident when their vehicle nearly got struck by a rocket propelled grenade. In this event he mentioned that it felt like his heart

stopped. This indicates that he perceived himself and his team members to be in imminent danger. The rocket did not hit the vehicle. V3's colleague used a jesting remark to explain that having your head above the roof while the grenade flew by might have been worse than sitting inside the car. It is likely that they both perceived this situation to be terrifying and expressing humor might have served as a means to release the stress. This might have had a positive effect on their ability to control stress. This form of stress regulation might have made it easier to continue the mission despite the danger involved. V3 states that they felt invincible, and immediately continues to speak about how they in a practical way solved the situation. This reiterates the perceived importance of exercising their military training.

The feeling of invincibility might refer to the adrenaline rush associated with imminent danger. Perhaps the release of stress after having survived also contributes to why he felt this way. He mentioned that they were in high spirits. As previously explained, this indicates that this attitude is shared among the unit. It is not certain that all members of the unit felt the same way, but this may be a common way of expressing the feelings associated with combat as long as things are perceived to go well. The event is framed in a positive way regardless of the personal risk involved. It does not seem that this incident is perceived to be traumatic for V3.

V5 describes the incident involving friendly fire. He says that this is the most stressful incident he remembers. In doing so he infers that this firefight was perceived to be severely dangerous. He does not refer to anything about this incident as positive. He was fired upon by his own forces and this might have strongly affected how he views the incident.

His retelling of the event is exclusively from a military perspective, detailing the chain of events. He did not mention any emotional response in relation to taking out enemy combatants. It is likely that this action was perceived to be morally justified given that they were firing on the participant. It may also be possible that there are negative emotions associated with this action that are not discussed.

In this incident the application of problem-based coping in an attempt to complete the mission seems to have intentionally subjected the unit to more danger than if they had removed themselves from the line of fire. The decision to drive up on the ridge seems to be based on what is perceived to be the best course of action in order to complete the mission, regardless of the extra danger involved. This may reflect a perceived importance of completing the

designated task, even if it involved additional risk to the personnel. V5 indicates that completing the mission must take precedence. Perhaps it would be perceived as failure not to try to relay the message of friendly fire, regardless of the additional risk involved. Applying effective problem-based coping regardless of outcome or additional risk to personnel seems to be important to the participants.

It may point towards a position where effective problem-based coping might be seen as a measurement of success. A hypothetical example to illustrate this would be if something is objectively dangerous while subjectively perceived to be manageable. This might be easier for the participant to handle than a less dangerous situation where they do not perceive to have sufficient coping mechanisms (12). The dangerous situation would involve a lower risk of failure because the participant was able to cope effectively. In this hypothetical example the outcome of the incident is not what defines success.

Even if it is not stated directly it is likely that some form of coping in regard to V5's emotions was taking place. This might entail suppressing them as mentioned by other participants. It is possible that emotions must be suppressed to some extent in order to continue working under severely dangerous circumstances. It is also likely that suppressing his emotions may have helped to apply problem-based coping. Perhaps there was no strong need to cope emotionally as effective problem-based coping was taking place. This could be part of the explanation why the participants want to apply their military training to all incidents. By practically managing the event they may experience less severe emotions. This would illustrate the interlocking relationship of coping mechanisms where one method of coping can serve both functions (15). What seems evident is that regardless of the severity of the incident, effective problem-based coping was applied.

In the next incident V5 stated that his colleague's vehicle got hit by a rocket propelled grenade. He seems to contradict himself when he says that this incident was perceived to be more stressful than the last. He expresses the wish to act quickly. In the seconds before his unit can intervene, he has time to think about what might have happened to his colleagues. It seems that being confronted with these possible outcomes, rather than being in imminent danger himself is what was perceived as most stressful. This incident was described as severely stressful and might help explain why such events have the potential to produce distress symptoms. V5 and the other participants mentioned witnessing such events as stressful while the events were unfolding. It seems that being able to actively perform his job

eased this feeling of distress. This might also explain why V2 felt a void opening up when he did not know how to react after his colleague died. When V2 analyzed the event in order to better be prepared it may have been an attempt to avoid this feeling of distress in future events.

V2 led his team in the wrong direction during a firefight. He mentioned that there are things that he still thinks about and stresses him to this day. It is likely that this is one of these events. When he realized his mistake, he did not ponder his decision to pull back. It seems that even if he realized the severity of his mistake, he was able to remain present in the moment and act rationally. It is possible that his emotions warned him of the mistake that was unfolding. It may also be that his emotions helped him make a quick decision. If this is true, it would illustrate that suppressing emotions too much may not be the best course of action. He mentioned that one has to be prepared to do bad things. This indicates that he might have been prepared for such an event. This point of being mentally prepared is also mentioned by other participants. It is possible that being prepared allows them to not only apply problem-based coping more effectively, but also handle their emotions better. It may also act reassuring to be mentally prepared for possible adverse events.

V2 discussed the incident with his team members. He claimed responsibility for the incident, acknowledging his mistake. In doing so he remained true to the event and himself, keeping his integrity and most likely maintained the respect of his unit. The members of the unit acknowledged that they also should have realized what was happening, and thereby also admitted fault. In doing so they were probably more able to assess and evaluate the event in order to improve their performance in the future. This may also have helped them to cope with the emotions associated with the incident. Admitting fault without being ostracized from the group is most likely reassuring to the individual regarding his future relationship with his colleagues. V2's actions in the aftermath of the incident also seem to reflect a strong sense of responsibility. The ability to trust one another is essential in order to function well as a group, and this trust is likely maintained through V2's actions after the event. In maintaining trust and honesty the unit may be able to cope with the mistake emotionally and continue to solve the mission using problem-based coping.

4.2 Comparing findings to previous research

4.2.1 Subjective perception on deployment:

The participants in this study had a positive mind frame towards deployment to Afghanistan. Two participants stated that it was exciting to be deployed. Another participant said that ‘it was a lot of fun’. In a study (11) based on interviews conducted by Gustavsen the veterans focused on acquiring work experience and fulfilling their military duties. Gustavsen (11) stated that veterans found meaning predominantly from the military framework. In that regard one may assume that deployment enabled the participants to generate meaning from their experience. In the present study we found that active duty was considered more interesting than camp duty. Active duty refers to conducting missions outside of the camp. Such missions involve a higher degree of risk but may provide additional military experience for the participants and thereby generate more meaning within the military framework as found by Gustavsen (11).

The interviews in this study indicate that the positive mind frame towards deployment and redeployment was shared among members of the military unit in which they worked. This suggests a strong cohesion in the military unit. Cohesion in a military setting involves that members of the unit work well together, trust, care and support each other (21). Thomassen et al (21) found that strong cohesion increase stress resiliency among Norwegian troops deployed to Kosovo. A study of soldiers from the UK deployed to Iraq showed lower levels of mental health problems in units with strong cohesion (22). Strong unit cohesion might have contributed in a positive way to the participants’ ability to cope with the incidents they experienced.

A study (23) conducted by Bartone on US army reserves indicate that hardiness may protect against war related stress. The study (21) by Thomassen et al on Norwegian Kosovo veterans also found that psychological hardiness contributed to stress resiliency. Individuals with high hardiness perceive the world as interesting, engage actively with their environment and believe in their own abilities to influence events (21). They view challenges as opportunities for learning and personal growth (21). Thomassen et al’s study (21) indicated that individuals with low hardiness reported lower levels of mental health problems if cohesion levels were high. This suggests that strong cohesion might be beneficial for individuals with less hardiness. The participants in the present study had undergone a selection process and rigorous military training. It is therefore reasonable to assume that they had a high degree of

psychological hardiness. Both cohesion and hardiness might thus have been relevant factors in preventing negative health effects among the participants and contributed to the persistence of the positive mind frame towards deployment to a warzone and experiencing combat.

Social support is another factor that may have contributed positively to the persistence of this mind frame. One large study (24) that used data from the Afghanistan survey found that social support was an important contributor to post-traumatic growth after having experienced major stressors. Oppositely, reluctance to speak about war experiences was found to be a contributor to post-traumatic deprecation. However, when social support was available, reluctance to talk about experiences from war no longer significantly negatively impacted posttraumatic development (24). The participants in the present study worked as full-time employees in the military unit. Many of them resided on the military base. This close proximity to colleagues might have served the function of social support. They also had the opportunity to speak with colleagues who shared their war experience. This probably reduced fear of stigmatization when speaking about war related events and may have reduced reluctance to disclose such information. According to Nordstrand et al this social support might be associated with post-traumatic growth (24). Additionally, Nordstrand et al (10) found that roughly 80% of Norwegian Afghanistan veterans report a positive change post deployment. If such a positive change occurred in the participants in our study, it might help explain the positive mind frame towards redeployment.

4.2.2 The first firefight:

The participants in our study described the first firefight as exciting and liberating. The participants did not appear to be confronted with severe danger or non-danger-based stressors in this event which according to Nordstrand et al can produce later distress symptoms (5). The absence of severe stressors may have contributed to the positive recollection of the event. Nordstrand et al's findings also suggest that post-traumatic growth can occur from such events (5). The validation experienced by V3 in our study when he perceived himself to act in a satisfying way may have been a factor that facilitated post-traumatic growth.

V4 explicitly mentioned that he had waited for the attack to happen and that it was perceived to be liberating. This implies that there was something about waiting for an attack to happen that was stressful, and this stress was released when the attack happened. This would constitute as a non-danger-based stressor. Nordstrand et al (5) only included stressors that matched the three categories Personal Risk, Witnessing and Moral Challenges. Waiting for, or

anticipating and attack would not fall under any of the categories of Nordstrand et al's study (5). Our study had the opportunity to investigate what the participants experienced as stressful without excluding any stressors and suggests that waiting for, or anticipating an attack had the potential to produce stress among the participants.

Another participant expressed that he reacted calmly and "that I am who I think I am". Indicating that how he perceives himself to think and act during combat may relate to how he regard himself. In order to discuss this, it may be useful to address the theory of Shattering Assumptions by Janoff-Bullman (25) which Nordstrand mentions in his PhD thesis (26). In short, the theory states that people have assumptions about the world and themselves. These assumptions may be unrealistic and trauma has the potential to force a person to reorient their preexisting assumptions (25). This reorientation of assumptions can facilitate post-traumatic growth (27). However, trauma also has the potential to produce post-traumatic deprecation (28). Within Janoff-Bullmans framework it is suggested that it may be harder to reconstruct new adaptive assumptions after experiencing non-danger-based trauma (29).

Within the framework of Shattering Assumptions, the participants statement "I am who I think I am" can be interpreted as his wish to validate the assumption about who he thinks he is. The core assumption of the participant's character is then reliant on how he perceives himself to think and act, not of the outcome of the situation. If the participant perceive himself to fail in his military duty during combat his assumption of who he is may shatter. On the other hand, if his assumption is validated this might be related to the relief the participant expresses regarding the first firefight.

4.2.3 The death of a colleague:

Several of the participants in our study suppressed their emotions and assisted their colleagues in what appears to be a shift from initial emotion-based coping to problem-based coping. This action seems to have had a positive effect on the colleague's ability to do their job and the outcome of the mission. In V4's case suppression of his emotions seems to facilitate this shift in his unit. This appears to reduce the amount of time it took for the unit to implement problem-based coping in accordance with military training. As indicated by Skinner et al (15) many ways of coping can serve to address the problem and also regulate emotions. In this case effective emotion-based coping seems to facilitate problem-based coping. In V1's case it may have allowed his colleague to participate and thereby generate meaning within the military framework as suggested by Gustavsen (11). These examples reiterate the indication

that there was a high degree of cohesion in the unit which might have increased the participants resilience to stress as found by Thomassen et al (21). Nordstrand et al (24) found that social support could contribute to post-traumatic growth after major stress, but their study was based on data from questionnaires post deployment and it is difficult to assess to what degree it relates to our finding. It is however possible that the way the participants helped each other had the potential to contribute to post-traumatic growth. The finding from our study further suggests that coping strategies in the military unit can be a cooperative project. Examples of this is when V1 and V4 chose to include or help their colleagues to cope with the combat situation. Another example is when V2 discussed the incident in which he made a mistake with his team.

4.2.4 No plan survives the confrontation with reality

Some of the participants combat experiences are framed as positive while others are framed as negative. Severity of the incident and personal risk did not seem to predict how the participants framed the events. All participants experienced danger and non-danger-based stressors. Both types of stressors were able to produce immediate stress among the participants. However non-danger-based events seem to have the potential to be perceived as more stressful when compared to incidents only involving personal risk. This is exemplified by V5 when he had time to think about whether or not his colleagues had been killed by a rocket propelled grenade. This event qualifies as Witnessing according to Nordstrand et al (5). It seems that being confronted with possible negative outcomes of the situation was the origin of V5's stress. Another example is when V2 found himself without adequate training after his colleague had been killed. The Afghanistan survey (3) found positive correlation between the degree of stressful events and levels of stress after deployment. Nordstrand et al (5) reiterate this finding and adds that non-danger-based stressors may be worse than danger-based-stressors in terms of producing psychological distress. The immediate stress response experienced by the participants in non-danger-based events might support Nordstrand et al's (5) findings.

Our findings indicate that the ability to personally and effectively intervene is regarded as an important criterion for how the participants view success, regardless of personal risk or outcome of a combat situation. One example of this is when V5's unit took additional risk in order to send a message that friendly fire was taking place. In this case the unit exposed themselves to additional danger in order to complete the mission. Another example is when

V2 perceived himself to fail in his duty when he had no training to fall back on after his colleague had been killed. Even if he had sufficient training to fall back on it would not have changed the fact that his colleague had been killed. Gustavsen states (11) that the veterans separated their own effort from its consequences, and that they generated meaning from what was controllable for them, namely their own effort. The findings from our study might support this statement by Gustavsen. However, our findings also indicate that how the participants view their own effort is tightly related to how they measure success while events are unfolding.

Litz et al (30) mention 'failure to prevent' as a moral stressor. Nordstrand et al's study includes the moral stressor "failed to act on something I in retrospect think I should have done" (5, p4). If the participants in our study had failed to act or prevent something undesirable from happening, they would have been susceptible to this kind of moral challenge or injury. In our study there are examples of participants personally intervening and thereby continuing to expose themselves to danger or even take additional personal risk. One example of this is the situation explained above when V5's unit took additional risk to complete the mission. Another example is when V3's unit continued the mission after their vehicle nearly got hit with a rocket propelled grenade. This course of action may have prevented the participants from experiencing a Moral challenge such as 'failure to prevent' or failure to act. Nordstrand et al (5) found that danger-based stressors were linked to positive changes in the self-confidence dimension and an increase in awareness of life-values. When the participants in our study exposed themselves to danger, and in doing so avoided 'failure to prevent' or act it might have increased the probability for post-traumatic growth and not deprecation as mentioned by Nordstrand et al (5).

4.3 Discussion of the design and method

My shared experience with the participants positioned me as an insider. This had certain advantages (31) as well as implications. I had easier access to interviews, knowledge on the subject and a better ability to understand the implied content. It also required me to have a reflective stance to the whole research process.

4.3.1 Access to interviews

My status as a veteran gave me easier access to military personnel that were willing to share their experience. Trust between the participants and myself was already well established. The veterans were cooperative and allowed me to ask personal questions about what they

perceived to be challenging. One veteran explicitly replied that he would not have allowed himself to be interviewed by an outsider with no understanding of the military. He feared that what he said would be misunderstood. Another veteran mentioned that it can be hard to speak about inflicting violence and death of another human being because people have a strong intuition that this action is wrong regardless of the context in which it occurs. In that sense the veteran could be condemned even if his actions were within the legal framework of the law. Stigma is socially and institutionally produced (32). My status as a colleague and veteran reduced the risk of stigmatization of the participants. Contrary to my personal experience during active duty, studies have found a reluctance of military personnel to disclose experiences that differ from subcultural expectations regarding psychological resilience (33). I thought my relation to the participants might contribute to counteract this possible reluctance to speak about such experiences.

4.3.2 Knowledge about the subject

My experience allowed me to approach the study with some knowledge about the subject. It gave me the opportunity to address certain aspects of the interviews such as violence and fear more easily. It also made me aware that I should try to investigate their response to other events than those only involving personal risk or death of personnel. Because I am familiar with such events, I was not distracted by the graphic nature of their recollections. I could focus on the research question without being shocked by their stories. Sometimes the participants would say “you know what I mean”, acting under the assumption that I understood what they said. One example is when they spoke about something emotionally challenging while they had a job to do. “Yes, I was angry, but there was no time for that, we had a job to do, you know what I mean”, implying that I understood that they had to manage their emotions in order to fulfill their duty. And also, that failure to fulfill one’s job could be dangerous and therefore they had to control their emotions.

4.3.3 Shared experience position

Coming from the shared experiences position I was better equipped to understand implied content. I was familiar with military jargon. This meant that I did not need any explanation when they used military language or abbreviations. I am also familiar with the weapon systems, operating procedures and terrain in which they physically navigated. This allowed me to better understand the situations they spoke of and the danger involved. One example would be when they spoke of harassment fire. They did not need to explain this term as I

knew that this generally implies that a few bullets with a low degree of precision and perhaps from very long range being shot in the direction of the military personnel. Depending on the severity this might not be perceived to be very dangerous, and the participants might not even count this as a 'real' firefight when compared to more severe firefights. The shared experience allowed me to probe more effectively in an attempt and get nuance and details from their experience. There were instances where the participants would answer how a situation was handled militarily. I followed up questions and they were given time to reflect about events to get more details about their experience. One such example is the follow up question of what V5 perceived to be stressful when he was unsure if his colleagues had been killed.

On the other hand, the position of the researcher as an insider with shared experiences involves a risk of imposing beliefs, blind spots, blurring boundaries and projecting biases (34). It was therefore important that I let the participants tell their stories rather than forcing them to take certain directions. The researcher is not invisible in his own research, however he should remain in the background and evaluate what he has to leave aside in order to represent the participants stories in a loyal fashion (35). I was careful to refrain from insinuating that I preferred a certain type of answer. I did not want my own experiences to influence the participants answers and so I refrained from mentioning them. When they mentioned details from events, I did not mention my own view of the situation, but instead allowed them to speak freely about what they remembered. Because of my familiarity with the subject it was productive to have mentors that provided a different position when viewing the data. This helped to identify different perspectives on what the participants said and also resulted in a few elements that I had originally excluded being part of the final product. One such example is the phone call made by V1 to his mother to inform her of his redeployment.

4.3.4 Differing experiences

The aim was not to emphasize one unified version of how events transpired or to generalize about how individuals felt. Several of the participants experience differed from my own. One example of this is V3's description of being in high spirits during a specific firefight. I did not share this feeling during that moment in the firefight, instead I felt intense concentration and responsibility. Another example was the account of when a colleague was killed. Some participants expressed strong emotions related to the event. During this incident my feelings

were more related to the potential impact this would have on my colleague's mental health and what implications that might have for the future of our deployment.

4.3.5 Data collection and interpretation

This form of data collection is reliant on how the participants remember the past events. Their recollection of the actual events may not be accurate. Their memories of the events may be influenced or distorted by their feelings and how they wish to be portrayed. There is, however, many versions of reality that can be true (36) and with a qualitative approach one is interested in the account given by a certain informant at a certain time and in a certain situation – chosen to gain information-rich data on the research question, an object to constant reflection on the knowledge production.

The process of data collection is often time consuming and there was a limit to how many participants that could be included. A larger number of participants does not necessarily guarantee a higher degree of transferability. The specificity of the research question, the focused theory, the relevance of the sample and the intention of attempting to increase external validity determines the appropriate number of participants (37). In terms of validity, the informants were not given the opportunity to read the transcripts and correct potential errors. Giving them this opportunity would not necessarily have made the transcript truer to how events actually happened (35).

The interviews were carried out by telephone and they would probably have been different if we had the chance to interact face to face. It might have allowed me as the interviewer to react to the emotional state of the participant in a more precise way or to stay tuned to elaborate answers and responses. There was probably additional information given by the participant that was lost due to lack of personal interaction. On the other hand, telephone interviews may require that the participant is more specific in follow-up questions as they are unable to rely on non-verbal communication (38). According to Cachia and Millward (38) this may lead to a more explicit exploration of the individuals experience. Telephone interviews moreover reduced the costs and gave me the opportunity to interview participants I could not have met in person (38), and the participants had greater flexibility in determining when they had time to be interviewed. It also provided them with the opportunity to choose the location and setting in which they felt most comfortable (39). It was easy to reschedule the time of the interview if so needed. Drabble et al (40) mention validation and clarification, informal conversational exchanges and respectful attention as effective interviewer strategies

for collecting narrative data by telephone. Before the interviews, I had an informal conversation with each participant. By not interrupting them and following up their answers it may have served the function of validation and respectful attention. These factors might have contributed a positive supplement to the interviews.

My position and relation to the participants have also affected the collection and interpretation of the data. If a different interviewer, not familiar with the events described or military jargon, the retelling of the events would probably have been done in a different way to explain the interviewer what was being said. This may have provided a different interviewer additional insight and perspectives. I have several preconceptions about the subject being researched and I have tried to be transparent of the process. Malterud states that “preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them” (37, p484), and that personal issues can be a valuable source of relevant and specific research (37). However, this is dependent on the notion that reflexivity is maintained through the research process. Qualitative research is based on the premise that the researcher himself is positioned and he will always bring preconceptions into both data collection and analysis. This calls for a reflexive approach to all study phases, something I have tried to take into account and be critical of during this study.

I found some surprising findings that I had not expected. I believe this conforms to some extent that I was able to bracket my own preconceptions.

1. The ability to participate in a subjectively adequate way to an event may give the individual an opportunity to generate positive meaning from the experience.
2. Having time to think about possible adverse outcomes might be perceived as more stressful than physical danger.
3. How one participant thinks and acts in a situation might be closely related to how the participant views himself.
4. Being able to fulfill one’s duty in accordance with military operating procedures might be a measurement of success regardless of the outcome of the situation.

4.3.6 Semi-structured interviews:

The study used semi-structured qualitative interviews to collect data. The interviews gained insight into how the participants recalled their experiences. and allowed in-depth investigation into how and in what way the participants handled and perceived the situations they described (35). It may be that perceptions of how the events are actually unfolded, differ between the veterans who were present in the event. But qualitative research is interested in their subjective understanding of the events and this is the foundation on which they made their decisions. Semi-structured qualitative interviews are thus a good way of illuminating this

subjective understanding and provides a qualitative result that can be discussed further or elaborated in later studies.

4.3.7 Participants:

All participants worked in the same military unit and the results reflect this to a large degree. It may be that the results are more representative of the actual unit, although this is not possible to confirm with such a small sample size. The participants represented a small percentage of veterans who have experienced numerous firefights and had worked as professional soldiers for several years. Participation bias must be taken into account when reviewing the results. The individual experiences may vary, and this study cannot determine if the results apply to Afghanistan veterans in general.

On the other hand, the experience of the participants may reflect elements that are recognizable to other military combat personnel. Because of their numerous deployments, and years of experience it is possible that the events and coping mechanisms described may be more generalizable in terms of analytic generalizability than the small sample size suggests. Their stories reflect experiences from being at war, and they might hold insight of value to active service members and future soldiers. Because of this factor the findings of this study might be of relevance. In order to more precisely gauge the external validity of the study it should be read and commented by military personnel or others with expertise on the subject.

4.3.8 Analysis

The thematic analysis was specifically focused on the process of coping described by the participants. It was not considered necessary to give a rich and diverse description of the data. Instead, the focus was to give a detailed and nuanced account of the data related to the research question. Theoretical thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (19) was therefore considered useful. Thematic analysis is more usable for a novice researcher when compared to other methods as it can be learned rather quickly (19). It forces the researcher to apply a structured approach, to summarize features and provide a 'thick description' of the dataset (19). On the other hand, the flexibility offered by thematic analysis may lead to a lack of coherence or inconsistency when developing themes derived from the data (41). Even so, the interpretive power of this method may be limited and not go beyond description of the data if it is not interpreted within a theoretical framework (19). It is the researchers responsibility is to give a thick description of the data so those who seek to transfer the findings can judge transferability (42).

4.3.9 Different aspects of validity

The ability of the researcher to communicate his research affects the validity of the information. The researcher needs to be transparent of the strategies and choices made during the research process. This is important in order for the reader to understand the foundation on which the interpretations are made and to demonstrate trustworthiness (35). By stating my preconceptions and my position I have attempted to be honest of my role and position as a researcher. In the discussion I offer my reflections and interpretations of what I perceive to be relevant while attempting to maintain transparency on what basis the statements are made. I focused on giving space to an understanding directly derived from citations by the participants and explanations on their contextual conditions. By doing so I wanted to increase confirmability in demonstrating how interpretations and conclusions had been reached (43). In my opinion this approach also improves readability and thereby expands the audience for this thesis. Readability is important but should not hinder the transparency of a reflexive approach, or the conveying of an intersubjective and systematic analysis. The decision to focus much on an understanding derived from citations has potential drawbacks. When giving voice to the participants the researcher may select narrative evidence that supports the argument or position of the researcher (44). It was therefore important to analyze the results within a theoretical framework in order to compare the findings within a contextual understanding provided by literature on the research subject.

4.3.10 Implications of this study for future investigations

A large Norwegian study concludes that Afghanistan veterans who experienced a high load of potentially traumatic incidents are more likely to develop PTSD (3). The findings of the present study may provide a deeper understanding of what constitutes a traumatic event. Such an understanding might be helpful when attempting to identify incidents that can cause long term negative health effects. When Hougsnæs et al (3) use the term “load”, it may refer to the number of or severity of an incident that might produce post-traumatic health effects. Hopefully, our findings also can provide a more nuanced understanding of what represents a “load”.

5 Conclusion

The participants in our study had a positive mind frame towards deployment to Afghanistan. The persistence of this mind frame toward redeployment to a warzone might indicate psychological resilience from adverse events. The participants described the first firefight as

exciting and liberating. One participant explicitly expressed the wish to validate his ability to function during combat. It is further indicated that how he perceives himself to think and act during combat may relate to how he regarded himself. Several of the participants in our study suppressed their emotions and assisted their colleagues in what appears to be a shift from initial emotion-based coping to problem-based coping. This action seems to have had a positive effect on the colleague's ability to do their job and the outcome of the mission. The study suggests that coping strategies in the military unit can be a cooperative project.

Some of the participants combat experiences are framed as positive while others are framed as negative. Severity of the incident and personal risk did not seem to predict how the participants framed the events. The study suggests that waiting for, or anticipating an attack had the potential to produce stress among the participants. All participants experienced danger and non-danger-based stressors, and both types of stressors were able to produce immediate stress among the participants. However non-danger-based events seem to have the potential to be perceived as more stressful when compared to incidents only involving personal risk. This suggests that non-danger-based events might be perceived as more traumatic than danger-based events while they are unfolding. One participant experienced the worst stress of his career after witnessing his colleague's vehicle being struck by a rocket propelled grenade. He was given a relatively short time to wonder if his friends had been killed or not before being able to directly intervene. Being confronted with these possible outcomes seems to have been the origin of the stress associated with the situation.

Our findings indicate that the ability to personally and effectively intervene is regarded as an important criterion for how the participants view success, regardless of personal risk or outcome of a combat situation. The participants in our study exposed themselves to danger in order to complete the mission. By doing so they may have reduced the risk of moral injury from non-danger-based stressors such as 'failure to prevent'.

A deeper understanding of what constitutes a traumatic event might be useful when attempting to identify incidents that can cause long term negative health effects.

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Appendix

Attachment 1: Interview guide

The interviewguide has been translated from Norwegian to English

Before military service: (attempt to reveal stress and coping mechanisms)

How old were you when you joined the military?

Did you have stressful elements in your life?

How would you define stress during this period?

Which situations could trigger stress?

How did you perceive the stress?

How was the stressful incidents handled?

Military career:

In which military unit have you served and for how long?

How would you define stress during this period?

Which situations could trigger stress?

How did you perceive the stress?

During combat, what was perceived to be stressful? Was it danger, or other factors that produced stress?

How were the stressful incidents handled?

Post military career

How did you perceive coming back to Norway after deployment?

How is your life today? Do you have work? Family?

Is there anything that is perceived to be stressful today?

How is this stress perceived?

How do you proceed to handle this?

Do you feel that you are successful in handling these events?

Have experiences from combat made you more or less capable of handling events today?

How do you rate your own ability to handle stress?

Is this attributed to military training or experiences from Afghanistan?

In what way?

How would you define a good way of handling stress or difficult situations?

Attachment 2: Consent form



Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt

Mestring blant norske Afghanistan veteraner

Dette er en forespørsel til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å finne ut av hvordan norske Afghanistan veteraner opplever hverdagen etter endt militærtjeneste. Målet er å utforske mestringsfølelse og håndteringsstrategier i hverdags situasjoner. Prosjektet vil være ferdig juni 2020. I dette skrevet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet, og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Hva innebærer prosjektet

Dette er en kvalitativ studie til en masteroppgave på medisinstudiet. Deltagelse i prosjektet innebærer at du blir intervjuet av Jørgen Jensen Ribe som er medisinerstudent fra 5. året på studiet. Intervjuet vil handle om hvordan du opplever å mestre situasjoner i hverdagslivet etter endt tjeneste i Afghanistan. Det vil bli lagt fokus på om du opplever endring i hvordan du håndterer stress, om du tar i bruk de samme mestringsstrategiene som før eller om disse er endret etter militærtjeneste. Intervjuet tar ca 40 minutter og gjennomføres per telefon.

UIT Norges Arktiske Universitet / Institutt for klinisk medisin og Institutt for samfunnsmedisin er faglig ansvarlig for prosjektet. Det blir gjennomført intervju av 5 Afghanistan veteraner som er ferdig med aktiv militærtjeneste. Du får spørsmål om å være med fordi du er Afghanistan veteran som er ferdig med aktiv tjeneste. Du er en mine tidligere kollegaer og jeg rekrutterer fra eget nettverk.



Frivillig deltakelse og mulighet for å trekke sitt samtykke

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Du kan når som helst og uten å oppgi grunn trekke ditt samtykke til å delta. Dersom du trekker deg fra prosjektet, kan du kreve å få slettet innsamlende opplysninger, med mindre de allerede er inngått i analyser eller brukt i vitenskapelige publikasjoner. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg. Dersom du ønsker å delta, undertegner du samtykkeerklæringen på siste side.

Dersom du senere ønsker å trekke deg eller har spørsmål til prosjektet, kan du kontakte Jørgen Jensen Ribe på telefon (97581299) eller epost (jorgen.jensen.ribe@gmail.com) eller prosjektansvarlige Gunnvald Kvarstein (gunnvald.kvarstein@uit.no) eller Mette Bech Risør (mette.bech@uit.no) ved UIT Norges Arktiske Universitet. Personvernombud ved UIT Joakim Bakkevold (personvernombud@uit.no). NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS kan nås på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Prosjektansvarlig
(Forsker/veileder)

Eventuelt student

Mette B. Risør



Hva skjer med informasjonen om deg

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke. Navn registreres via samtykkeskjema. Intervjuet tas opp på digital lydopptaker. Båndopptakeren vil være frakoblet internett. Lydopptaket vil bli lagt over på en datamaskin tilhørende ansvarlig institusjon UiT og det vil bli laget et tekstdokument, en transkripsjon av intervjuet, deretter slettes lydopptaket fra datamaskin. Dette dokumentet danner grunnlaget for senere analyse av materialet. Tekstdokumentet lagres på passordbeskyttet kryptert harddisk og inneholder ikke ditt navn. Tekstdokumentet blir i tillegg individuelt kryptert og passordbeskyttet. Det er kun autorisert personell tilknyttet til prosjektet som har anledning til å få tilgang til ditt navn og bare masterstudenten som vet hvilket intervju som tilhører den enkelte deltaker. En kode knytter deg til dine opplysninger gjennom en navneliste som oppbevares separat.

Resultatet av analysen vil gi grunnlag for studentens masteroppgave. Resultatet av masteroppgaven kan bli overlevert til UiT Norges Arktiske Universitet og andre institusjoner, for eksempel Institutt for forsvarsstudier IFS. Det kan også bli aktuelt å publisere resultatene i et medisinsk tidsskrift. Det vil ikke være personidentifiserende opplysninger i den ferdige oppgaven.

Informasjonen som registreres om deg skal kun brukes som beskrevet i hensikten med studien. Du har rett til innsyn i hvilke opplysninger som er registrert om deg og rett til å få korrigert eventuelle feil i de opplysningene som er registrert.



Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrevet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Du vil ikke kunne gjenkjennes i en eventuell publikasjon. Opplysningene som publiseres om deg vil handle om hvordan du oppfatter en eventuell opplevet endring i mestringsfølelse. Alle opplysningene vil bli behandlet uten navn og fødselsnummer eller andre direkte persongjenkennende opplysninger. All skriftlig informasjon og datamateriale anonymiseres etter prosjektslutt. Prosjektleder har ansvar for den daglige driften av forskningsprosjektet og at opplysninger om deg blir behandlet på en sikker måte.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til å:

- få innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg
- få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få slettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få utlevert en kopi av dine personopplysninger (dataportabilitet)
- sende klage til personvernombudet eller Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.



Godkjenning

Prosjektet defineres ikke som medisinsk forskning jvf Regional komite for medisinsk og helsefaglig forskningsetikk, da formålet ikke handler om å gi ny kunnskap om sykdom og helse i medisinsk forstand. Det er derfor ikke fremleggingspliktig i REK. Prosjektet meldes inn for NSD personvernombudet for forskning.

Samtykke til deltakelse

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *Mestring blant norske Afghanistan veteraner* og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

å delta i intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, ca Juni 2020.

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Deltakers navn med blokkbokstaver

Grading of papers

Referanse: Nordstrand AE, Hjemdal, O., Holen, A., Reichelt, J. G., & Bøe, H. J. Measuring psychological change after trauma: Psychometric properties of a new bi-directional scale. Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy. 2017			Studydesign: Cross-sectional retrospective
			Grade quality 3
Aim	Method	Results	Discussion/comments/check-list
Attempt to develop a scale that will capture the continuum of positive to negative psychological changes after trauma .	Study population: The study used data from a cross-sectional, postdeployment examination carried out during the spring of 2012. n: 4053. In the first step, 1,000 of the responders were randomly assigned to a sample for model development of the posttraumatic change scale (PTCS), whereas in the second step the remaining sample (N = 3,053) was utilized for a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the model.	Principal component analysis: The PCA in the first step produced five dimensions with eigen-values greater than 1, of which four dimensions were retained as having utility. The four dimensions were labeled Self-Confidence (Dimension I, eight items), Interpersonal Involvement (Dimension II, six items), Awareness (Dimension III, six items) and Social Adaptability (Dimension IV, six items) based on the semantic content of the various clusters of items.	- 80,8% of the sample reported positive change, this is in line with prior research. - Study did not find a positive correlation between reported positive changes and psychological distress, which supports the notion that genuine posttraumatic changes have been reported. -the change reports are more differentiated when looking at individual PTCS dimensions; a substantial minority (22.0%) reported negative changes on Inter-personal Involvement. Compared with the other dimensions, the positive-change rate here was relatively low (36.8%). In our view, these points increase the chances of genuine positive changes to have been reported. -The results emphasize that exposure to major stressors may frequently, but not always, elicit positive posttraumatic changes in combination with low levels of distress.
Conclusion	Procedure: The identified personnel received a mailed invitation to take part in the study by completing an enclosed 20-page questionnaire. A literature review on the potential positive and negative effects of trauma and related theoretical considerations was done. From this review, a pool of 45 nonleading items (statements) was generated. The items aimed to capture pivotal aspects of the psychological outcome after exposure to traumatic stressors.	Key findings: The vast majority of the participants reported positive changes on the total scale (80.8%), 11.1% reported no change, and 8.1% reported negative changes after deployment. -The degree of psychological distress differed significantly between the groups. The difference between the no-change and positive-change groups was modest whereas the difference between the negative-change group and the other two groups was substantial	Strengths of the study: - study is based on a large and data-rich sample -Post traumatic change scale (PTCS) was bidirectional and allowed positive, negative or no-change -Questionnaire was formulated in a neutral non-leading manner
	Statistical analysis: -The development of the current scale was undertaken in two steps. -The first was done by using a randomized selection of 1,000 respondents for the model development to pare down the number of items -The second step utilized the remaining sample (N = 3,053) to test the model fitness.	-The negative-change respondents scored significantly higher on posttraumatic stress symptoms, insomnia, anxiety, and depressive symptoms compared with the respondents reporting positive and no change. The positive-change respondents scored significantly higher than no-change respondents primarily on measures of post-traumatic stress symptoms and anxiety, with the exception of the Social Adaptability dimension, in which positive-change respondents also reported an increased depression score compared with the no-change respondents. - Respondents who reported a positive change displayed moderate symptoms of primarily posttraumatic stress symptoms and anxiety symptoms. Finally, the no-change respondents reported low levels of symptoms on all measures	Limitations: - Sample predominantly male – possible gender bias - The differentiating among negative-, positive-, and no-change respondents was not based on validated score ranges for inclusion into the respective groups but rather strict mean response scores. This can be a limitation in the current study. - Sample Consisted of trained military personnel. Participants preparedness may reduce generalizability. - the respondents may have passed through various developmental phases in regards to posttraumatic psychological change, psychological distress, and in how their combat experiences are remembered; this may have influenced the current results. - The cross-sectional design does not capture such changes. Furthermore, this study only reports current psychological distress in relation to psychological change. - Because the researchers do not know the participants stress responses at the time of exposure, the study cannot answer how acute stress responses relate to later psychological changes.
Country			
Norway			
Year of data collection			
2012	-A principal components analysis (PCA; Oblimin rotation) of the 45 items was carried out in the development sample (N = 1,000) -The remaining sample (N = 3,053) was used in a Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) procedure of the 26 items that met these criteria. The CFA was conducted with the asymptotically distribution free method to examine the overall fit of the model. - To quantify and compare the valence distribution of the posttraumatic change scores on the PTCS, the sample (N = 4,053) was split into three groups based on the participants' individual arithmetic mean scores: the negative-change group, the positive-change group, and the no-change group.		

Referanse: Gustavsen E. The construction of meaning among Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. Sagepub. 2016			Studydesign: Qualitative study – semistructured interviews
			Grade quality 2
Aim	Method	Results	Discussion/comments/check-list
<p>This article examines the construction of meaning among a group of Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. Three frameworks of interpretation are identified that were consistently used by the participating veterans to communicate the meaning of their deployment: 1: a military framework, which generated meaning from the military- and job-related aspects of their service; 2: a societal framework, which allowed them to emphasize the societal value of the endeavour; and 3: a personal framework, for conveying the personal impact of their experience. These meaning making strategies are analysed from a cultural perspective, in particular the lack of a shared war experience that characterizes Norwegian society.</p>	<p>Study population: 29 Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. All except 2 were male.</p> <p>Semi structured interviews: Interviews conducted at the participants workplace or in conference room. Duration approximately 1 hour per participant.</p> <p>Interviews were recorded and then transcribed by external consultant.</p> <p>Analysis Atlas.Ti computer program was used in generating codes from transcripts. The codes served as a foundation for further analysis.</p> <p>The three frameworks emerged from analysis of the data.</p>	<p>Key findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The predominant way the veterans framed the deployment was through a military frame- work of interpretation. Two elements were central: fulfilling their military job duties and acquiring a valuable work experience. - The veterans were very conscious to separate their job effort from what was accomplished on the ground - Most participants were noticeably frank in voicing their belief that they had not accomplished anything for the good of Afghanistan during their deployment - A common strategy was to separate their job effort from its consequences, which allowed them to interpret the relevance of their deployment within defined boundaries of responsibility. The veterans generated meaning from a factor that was readily available and controllable for them: their own effort – as opposed to the complex and convoluted situation on the ground. - Veterans presented their deployment as an effort for something greater than themselves, and not merely an extension of their military profession. The societal frame- work enabled the veterans to draw on an additional dimension of meaning by charging it with a national meaning aspect - Discussing their deployment from a societal perspective, the interviews suggest that many participants felt invisible in civilian society - The veterans believed the deployment had: 1 made them more robust as individuals, and 2 put their lives in a new perspective. The ups and downs in life did not affect them in the same manner as before, and many spoke of having gained a more robust mindset in which small problems seemed less bothersome. 	<p>-The first study investigating construction of meaning among norwegian afghanistan veterans.</p> <p>-Finding that military framework is most prevalent is corroborated by a study on UK soldiers</p> <p>Strength: -Qualitative design allows for investigation into deeper layers of meaning. -Can identify patterns of thinking that might be transferable to other groups. -Semistructured interviews allows nuance and detail to be explored. Transcribing was done by external personnel</p> <p>Limitations: -The study cannot draw generalized conclusions -Gender bias -Recollection bias</p>
Conclusion			
<p>A military interpretation was most prevalent among the interviewed veterans. The experience, did not have a unified meaning and they needed a societal and personal framework to express the full range of how they felt. The consistent use of the three frameworks suggests that certain elements of meaning were more readily available, apparently sharing some essential views generated at an interpersonal level prompting them to interpret experiences in similar ways. Investigating the deployment from a cultural and comparative perspective provides valuable insights into how the meaning of this experience is negotiated within a particular context of constraint and opportunity, which shapes the interpretation of events.</p>			
Country			
Norway			
Year			
2016			

Referanse: Nordstrand AE, Bøe HJ, Holen A, Reichelt JG, Gjerstad CL, Hjemdal O. Danger- and non-danger-based stressors and their relations to posttraumatic deprecation or growth in Norwegian veterans deployed to Afghanistan. Eur J Psychotraumatol. 2019;10(1):1601989			Studydesign: cross-sectional retrospective
Grade quality			3
Aim	Method	Results	Discussion/comments/check-list
The study aimed to explore how exposure to danger-based and non-danger-based stressors may influence personal changes in veterans (N = 4053) after deployment to Afghanistan.	<p>Study population: The study used data from a cross-sectional, postdeployment questionnaire carried out during the spring of 2012. n: 4053.</p> <p>War zone Stressors: Items that covered danger-based or non-danger-based stressors were selected. The danger-based stressors were related to Personal Threat incidents, while the non-danger-based stressors consisted of Moral Challenges and Witnessing incidents. Items that did not fit any of the three target stressor categories were omitted.</p> <p>Post traumatic characteristic of personal change: The Self-Confidence sub-dimension relates to trust in oneself, while the Interpersonal Involvement sub-dimension relates to trust in others. The Awareness sub-dimension relates to appreciation of life and inner values, while the Social Adaptability sub-dimension relates to social strategies and function.</p> <p>Measures of psychological distress measures: The following measures captured the levels of distress: anxiety, depression and insomnia. Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS). Insomnia Severity Index (ISI)</p>	<p>Key findings:</p> <p>-Exposure to Personal Threat, Moral Challenges and Witnessing explained a significant amount of the variance in all the outcomes; the types of stressors were all significant predictors of the posttraumatic stress symptoms in the model as expressed by the PTSS (total) score</p> <p>-Only Moral Challenges and Witnessing were significant predictors of the distress measures – anxiety, depression and insomnia, as measured respectively by the HADS-A, HADS-D and ISI scores.</p> <p>-Neither the number of deployments, nor time since last deployment, proved to be significant in the equation as predictors for any of the psychological distress measures.</p> <p>-Exposure to Personal Threat did not significantly differentiate between those who reported posttraumatic deprecation and those who reported posttraumatic growth.</p> <p>-Exposure to the non-danger-based stressor types, i.e. Witnessing and Moral Challenges, were significantly higher among respondents reporting posttraumatic deprecation, compared to those reporting posttraumatic growth.</p> <p>-Respondents with no posttraumatic change were significantly less exposed to any of the three stressor types when compared to those who reported post-traumatic deprecation or growth</p>	<p>- In line with previous findings, a certain exposure load seems required to result in posttraumatic deprecation or growth</p> <p>- the findings suggest that exposure to non-danger-based stressors may have a broader impact on the symptom expression than exposure to danger. This is comparable to recent studies investigating the impact of stressor types on soldiers in the US national guard.</p> <p>-The time elapsed since the last deployment to Afghanistan seems not to affect psychological distress in this model, indicating that the effects of exposure are not temporally dependent. This is contrary to some previous findings, where time since trauma has emerged as a significant predictor of the effect sizes for depression</p> <p>-Danger-based stressors are primarily linked to positive changes in characteristics such as higher self-confidence and increased awareness of life-values, as well as appreciation of life.</p> <p>Strength</p> <p>-Large sample</p> <p>- the current results are comparable to previous findings which indicate that the associations between the study's predictors and response variables are valid.</p> <p>Limitations</p> <p>-predominantly male participants – gender bias</p> <p>-Sample consisted of trained military personell, preparedness toward combat may reduce generalizability to the general population</p> <p>-Females and older veterans have higher response rate and this must be accounted for</p> <p>-Cross sectional design does not capture self reported changes over time, caution is required in inferring potential relations between stressors and the subsequent responses</p>
Conclusion	The study highlights the special adverse effects of non-danger-based stressors. The findings show that they are more associated with posttraumatic deprecation rather than with growth. This underscores the heterogeneity of responses to traumatic events and adds to the current knowledge about the impact of various stressor types.		
Country	Norway		
Year of data collection	2012		

Referanse: Thomassen ÅG, Hystad SW, Johnsen BH, Johnsen GE, Laberg JC, Eid J. The combined influence of hardiness and cohesion on mental health in a military peacekeeping mission: A prospective study. Scand J Psychol. 2015;56(5):560-6.			Studydesign: Prospective - cohort
			Grade quality ²
Aim	Method	Results	Discussion/comments/check-list
<p>The study investigates the combined effect of hardiness and cohesion in a prospective design, controlling for baseline levels of symptoms among Norwegian personnel serving in a peacekeeping operation in Kosovo</p>	<p>Study population: n: 144 of which 93,8% were male Soldiers from second Norwegian battalion that were deployed on a six-month mission to Kosovo (NORBN II). The battalion consisted of three infantry companies, an armored engineer company and a headquarters company</p> <p>The study makes use of data from three different time points. Demographic information, psychological hardiness, and baseline mental health were registered three weeks prior to deployment (Time 1). Unit cohesion was measured two months into deployment (Time 2), and mental health was again registered four months into deployment (Time 3).</p> <p>Measures: Hardiness: A tested and validated Norwegian translation of the fifteen- item Dispositional Resilience Scale was used to measure psychological hardiness. Cohesion: The respondents completed the Norwegian version of the Siebold and Kelly (1988) twenty-item Platoon Cohesion Index. This instrument is intended to measure three basic components of cohesion: horizontal, vertical, and organizational cohesion.</p> <p>Statistical analysis: Multivariate regression analyses was applied to test the hypotheses. In the first analysis, self-reported mental health complaints were regressed on the explanatory variables</p> <p>-Hypothesis: Higher levels of cohesion and hardiness are associated with lower levels of mental health complaints:</p> <p>-Predictors in regression analysis were age, military rank and main function as control variable. The main functions support (B = 0.30) and staff (B = 0.22) made a significant contribution to explaining self-reported mental health complaints, $R^2 = 0.09$, $F(5,138) = 2.81$, $p = 0.019$</p> <p>-Cohesion (B = -0.04) and hardiness (B = -0.03) were entered in the analysis, both making a significant contribution in explaining self-reported mental health complaints. Combined, hardiness and cohesion resulted in a 13% increase in explained variations in mental health complaints, $DR^2 = 0.13$, $F(2,136) = 11.16$, $p < 0.001$</p> <p>-In the third and final step, the interaction term cohesion x hardiness was entered, resulting in a statistically significant regression coefficient of $B = 0.01$ ($p = 0.004$). In total, our predictors explained approximately 27% of the variations in self-reported mental health complaints, $R^2 = 0.27$, $F(8,135) = 6.148$, $p < 0.001$.</p>	<p>Key findings:</p> <p>-The results found importance of hardiness and cohesion for mental health in a military context</p> <p>-The study found a significant interaction between hardiness and cohesion. However, individuals high in hardiness did not seem to make better use of the effects of cohesion than individuals low in hardiness.</p> <p>-For individuals scoring high on hardiness, cohesion levels did not influence levels of mental health complaints.</p> <p>-For individuals who scored low on hardiness, higher levels of cohesion were still an important resilience factor that contributed to lower levels of mental health complaints.</p> <p>-The results suggest that high hardy individuals are more capable of coping with the situation at hand, especially during high-stress conditions</p>	<p>The sample was positively skewed and showed that, as could be expected due to selection, the deployed personnel had a generally low level of mental health complaints. In addition,</p> <p>Support personnel and staff showed higher levels of mental health complaints than did soldiers with a combat function. This may be due to more strict health requirements for selection for combat units and because some personnel apply for less demanding service through self-selection.</p> <p>Participants was reduced from 480 to 144 due to missing information on participants</p> <p>The results from the study highlight the importance of the personality style of hardiness as a selection criteria and its relevance to military training</p> <p>Strengths</p> <p>-Importance of Hardiness and cohesion for mental health in a military context is replicated by previous studies</p> <p>-Prospective design allowed the study to adjust for prior mental health</p> <p>Limitations</p> <p>-Possible concern among participants to report mental health issues</p> <p>-Cohesion measure was based on individual evaluations contrary to a group level.</p> <p>-Participants were military personell from Norway, it may not be generalizable to other nations military forces.</p>
Conclusion	<p>The findings suggest that both cohesion and hardiness contributed to increased stress resiliency, as measured by a lower level of reported mental health complaints. The baseline measure of mental health accounted for a larger proportion of the variance than other predictors. A significant interaction between cohesion and hardiness suggested a combined effect, over and above the individual contributions of the predictors. For individuals who scored high on hardiness, cohesion levels did not influence levels of mental health complaints. Individuals who scored low on hardiness, on the other hand, reported lower levels of mental health complaints when cohesion levels were high.</p>		
Country	Norway		
Year	2015		

Referanse: Nordstrand AE, Bøe HJ, Holen A, Reichelt JG, Gjerstad CL, Hjemdal O. Social support and disclosure of war-zone experiences after deployment to Afghanistan—Implications for posttraumatic deprecation or growth. <i>Traumatology</i> (Tallahassee, Fla). 2020			Studydesign: cross-sectional retrospective
			Grade quality 3
Aim	Method	Results	Discussion/comments/check-list
The study explores social support and personal barriers toward disclosing war-related traumatic experiences and how both are associated with veterans' posttraumatic changes after deployment to Afghanistan.	Study population: The study used data from a cross-sectional, postdeployment questionnaire carried out during the spring of 2012. n: 4053. For this study respondents who reported exposure to potentially traumatic war zone stressors (n: 3,465) were identified and included in the final sample for further analyses	Key findings: - Perceptions of the available quantity and quality of social support, that is, structural and functional social support, both contribute independently and significantly toward developing PTG after exposure to war zone stressors - Personal barriers to disclose traumatic experiences to others contribute independently toward PTD . When the veterans report good structural and functional social support, the negative effect of this barrier seems to dissipate - The study did not find that time since deployment influenced the reports of either PTD or PTG - Higher age and personal barriers to disclose traumatic war-related experiences were both significant predictors of negative changes in the Post traumatic change score	- The finding that perceptions of the available quantity and quality of social support, structural and functional social support, both contribute independently and significantly toward developing PTG after exposure to war zone stressors, is in agreement with previous studies. - The results do not support the assumption made by other studies which predicts that PTG will increase over time. Strengths: -Large sample - The post traumatic change scale used has been validated in the cultural context of the respondents - Measure of social support was adopted from an inventory of the Oslo 3 support scale. This scale has high utility in large surveys; Limitations: -Sample consisted entirely of selected and well-trained military personnel, prepared for war-related traumatic exposures. May not be generalizable to the general population - Gender bias, 91,7% male -The study did not collect anamnestic data, or conduct diagnostic interviews. Data subject to the participants ability to self report. -Cross sectional design does not capture change over time - there are unknown variables, such as personality, that may explain a part of the total variance - time since deployment, this factor may have affected the accuracy of the retrospectively reported posttraumatic changes
Conclusion	Functional and structural support: The measure of social support was adapted from an inventory (Oslo 3 Support Scale) developed by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health for use in European health surveys . Traumatic exposure index: A 12-item traumatic exposure index identified veterans who had been stressor exposed (n- 3,465). The criteria for the inclusion were reports of involvement in one or more of 12 typical war-related stressors. The 12-item index covers events related to personal threats, morally challenging situations, and the witnessing of suffering and/or death of others. Post-traumatic changes: The full-scale score of the Posttraumatic Change Scale was used to assess reported changes after war-zone experiences in the veterans, either toward PTD, PTG, or no change. Data analysis: separate linear regression analyses to identify predictors of the posttraumatic changes, toward PTD, PTG, or no change. The analyses explored whether the personal barriers to disclose trauma, structural social support, and functional social support were significantly associated either inversely or positively with Post traumatic change scale scores in the regression equations.		
Country	Norway		
Year of data collection	2012		

