



Hours of Boredom, Moments of Terror: Temporal Desynchrony in Military and Security Force Operations

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The “hurry up and wait” phenomenon in many military operations is aptly called “hours of boredom,” whereas the transition to meet sudden task demands when combat breaks out is sometimes deemed to consist of “moments of terror.” Increasingly, other national security and paramilitary force personnel (e.g., police forces, border patrol, operational intelligence agents) also experience long periods of boredom interspersed with all-out response efforts when the going “gets hot.” The authors examine resultant psychological and behavioral implications for combatant and security personnel performance as viewed through application of a traditional human psychological stress model. Inadequate recognition of the implications resulting from long lull periods, combat pulses, and the need to recover from stress can lead to dysfunctional soldiering as well as poor individual and small unit performance. Accounting for such time-based transitions in the psychological state of military combatants and security force operators is important in configuring resilience training for small group leaders, their personnel, and their organizational units. As we seek to come to terms with the rapidly emerging challenges of military and other national security operations in the new millennium it is crucial to take a careful look at the fundamental characteristics of some of the tasks our deployed personnel are now being asked to perform. This assessment embraces a wide spectrum of requirements, since many former military job elements are now subject to outsourcing. Contemporary national security policies witness deployments of large number of State Department, international development agencies, and even Justice Department employees, many of whom carry out a myriad of activities with some of the same military characteristics and accompanying psychological and physiological stressors. Our comments may pertain to other national security forces as well, but here we exemplify our points by referring mostly to the tasks and stresses of military personnel. While not unique to the military, the core security tasks that remain for our professional military have evolved under the driving force of a changing environment, including a broad expansion of defense missions; for example, providing humanitarian assistance, stability and security operations, implementation of new technologies, and emerging forms of conflict such as engaging in asymmetric warfare and counterinsurgency operations. Whereas Krueger recently outlined an extensive listing of soldier stresses that impact performance of military personnel on contemporary and future battlefields, our central thesis here is that identifiable constants remain in the missions that military and other security force personnel are tasked to accomplish, especially in the temporal rhythm of these assignments. Often characterized as “hurry up and wait operations,” we term these requirements as “hours of boredom and moments of terror.” It is these forms of demand and their effect upon performance and health which form our primary concern. These temporal rhythms are normal and expected in military operations, and are becoming so in other security operations as well. Understood in this light, this article asserts that leaders should, in training, prepare their troops for high levels of cognitive and physiological readiness; they need to anticipate executing operational plans that often require patience and apparent, sometime boring inactivity that will eventually be followed by sustained maximum performance. This is, in turn, followed by anticipation of the next activity cycle as pulses in the normal sequence of boredom-terror-boredom – which is the military way of things. Advances in anticipatory strategy can help a variety of professional occupations (e.g., police, emergency response, and other security force workers) whose central temporal characteristics are highly similar to this military challenge.

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