

# BURNOUT: STAFF EXHAUSTION

**Major Stephen H. Bales, U.S. Army**

**C**OMMANDERS SHOULD PROACTIVELY take initiative to mitigate the conditions that cause their staffs to lose their peak effectiveness. Rejuvenating the staff through imaginative management can help prevent the erosion of effectiveness that systemic staff exhaustion and the current operational conditions encourage.

During my rotation for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) 06-08, CNN and other media outlets reported ongoing debate about the number and length of U.S. troop deployments. When the Army extended my unit's deployment to 15 months, my initial thoughts were, "Soldiers in World War II were deployed for three years or more. We do not sleep in the mud in the pouring rain, and we get 15 to 18 days of leave stateside. Life isn't that bad." The Army houses most Soldiers in Iraq in climate-controlled buildings with electricity, heat, and air conditioning, usually two Soldiers to a containerized housing unit with a bath and shower with hot and cold running water within 100 feet. Soldiers are not in constant contact with the enemy for extended periods as in World War II. Most get one or more days of rest a week with minimal duties and no combat patrols.

However, although Soldiers in World War II did not have the creature comforts our Soldiers have today, few spent 12 to 15 months at a time in a combat environment. Most participated in 90 to 100 days of operations and were then pulled off the line for refit and reconstitution (R&R) for two weeks to two months or more. Soldiers and staff officers alike rested. The Army's current 15 to 18-day environmental leave program offers leave only to individuals and does not address collective staff exhaustion due to prolonged employment. This practice presents real dangers associated with degraded teamwork.

As a young lieutenant in the early 1990s, I often saw Army posters in division, brigade, and battalion headquarters depicting a tired, dirty Soldier and displaying the sentences, "Staff Officer, do your job well. His life depends on it." The War on Terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan drives this point home.

Echeloned staff officers produce mission orders with strategic and operational objectives that make their way down to platoons, sections, and sometimes even individual Soldiers. Hence, some argue that we are waging the War on Terrorism almost exclusively at the company level and below. I do not necessarily disagree. Division, brigade combat team (BCT), and battalion commanders do not just arrive and turn the battle's tide by mere presence and force of will. In the dusty streets and deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan, squad leaders' actions can have significant, often enduring operational and even strategic impact.

*Major Stephen H. Bales holds a B.S. from the United States Military Academy. He deployed to Iraq with the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom 06-08 where he served as a battalion executive officer and brigade combat team engineer supervising reconstruction operations for the 4th BCT. His previous assignments include various command and staff positions in Korea, Australia, and the continental United States. He is currently serving as the deputy district engineer for the Louisville District of the Corps of Engineers.*

PHOTO: Troops from the U.S. Army's 1st Armored Division listen to U.S. General John Abizaid, the commander of the U.S. Central Command, inside the tactical operations center, in a former palace of Saddam Hussein in Tikrit, Iraq, 4 May 2004. (AP Photo/Mandatory Credit: Christopher Morris/VII)

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For these very reasons, the staff is more important than ever before. They need to use well-reasoned analysis, intellect, and experience to capture a commander's intent and guidance and transform them into coordinated, synchronized, resourced, and executable plans and orders for the company, platoon, and squad.

### **Information Overload and the Next Meeting**

Our units, particularly our staffs, enjoy unprecedented communications capabilities today. The Joint Network Transport Capability (JNTC) suite provides a full range of secure and non-secure voice and data links, interfaced common operational picture tools, and near real-time information transmission. Commanders and staff officers can access information about their areas of operations or interest at the click of a mouse. Collaboration tools abound. Staffs can access (or be force fed) so much information that they experience information overload.

As an example, when I was in Iraq on the staff of the 4th BCT, 1st Cavalry Division, on my desk I had a secure voice over internet protocol (VOIP) phone and a Secret Internet Protocol Router Network laptop plus a non-secure VOIP phone and an unclassified Sensitive Internet Protocol Router Network laptop. As the BCT engineer, I sent and received an average of about 60 emails a day on the two systems. When I was a battalion executive officer, that number was around 100. Primary staff officers on the BCT staff averaged over 150 per day. This email barrage can easily overwhelm staff officers, sap the staff's energy, and focus everyone inward instead of outward. Oral communication can be rare because staff members are too busy pushing the "send" key. Meaningful dialogue becomes the exception, and their listening skills diminish over time.

The average BCT or battalion staff officer in Iraq attends 10 to 12 routine meetings every week, half

of which or more involve the commander. This routine reflects the ubiquitous staff battle rhythm the Army has used for decades. These meetings include staff synchronization and coordination, working groups, operations and intelligence, commander updates, and maintenance meetings. In addition, nonrecurring meetings include operations order briefings, Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) sessions, or the ever popular distinguished visitor briefings, which occur an average of two times a month. Such a schedule gives us little time to think about, analyze, or discuss problems with other staff members. We are always preparing for the next meeting or briefing.

### **"I Know What the Boss Wants"**

What does this never-ending battle rhythm, unprecedented information availability, and extended work schedule produce? The answer is simple—staff exhaustion. Exhaustion negatively affects our ability to understand the commander's guidance and create effective plans and orders, which degrades subordinate unit effectiveness. There are three almost universal phenomena in today's information-laden deployment environment—

- Complacency.
- Loss of creative energy.
- Taking short cuts.

Ultimately, the Soldier on the ground pays the price for our exhaustion.

An early symptom of staff exhaustion is what many refer to as the "next slide" syndrome, which comes from our insatiable appetite for "visual" products that we can easily brief, package, and transport on the JNTC systems' backbone. Staffs reach a point where they think they have identified the format and content the commander wants with near absolute formulaic certainty. Working group and other preparatory meetings prior to briefing the commander become slide-review meetings. This procedural tyranny has become a norm on Army operational staffs over the years and is new only in

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the medium employed. Readers will recognize its form-over-substance quality. The chair of the meeting reviews the slide packet and repeatedly says “next slide” until the meeting is over. There is little discussion, thought, or analysis of the substance of the problem at hand. The person or section providing the slides has the answers, so there is no need to discuss the subject any further.

The “next slide” syndrome causes complacency, the first adverse effect of overwork in today’s information-laden deployment environment. If a staff member has the energy to see past the information on the slide and identify questions that require answers or discussion, he soon stops doing so because deputy commanders, executive officers, and S3s invariably ignore or marginalize him. Complacency grows. The staff member with an essential piece of information may well be a private first class intelligence analyst participating in the meeting, but he will not speak up when he sees captains and majors saying nothing or being marginalized on a regular basis.

If this situation persists, over time the staff loses its creative energy, stops conducting analysis, and just passes information to the commander. It does not make recommendations to the commander; it expects him to provide the recommendations or courses of action. Staff members under such conditions do not think; they react to the next crisis or the next bit of targetable information. If the staff executes the MDMP, it becomes a check-the-block exercise that lacks creativity and is risk-adverse and devoid of planning. The creative energy of the staff virtually disappears. This is the second adverse effect of overwork in today’s deployment environment.

Commanders often extol “thinking outside the box.” However, at this point in a staff’s life cycle, staff members and staff sections soon prefer to remain in a “comfort box” to cope with the mind-numbing repetition of meetings and briefings. Each officer’s “comfort box” is only as big as the computer screen in front of him. “Thinking outside the box” requires making the effort to look at the computer screen of the staff officer to one’s left or right. There is little or no creative thought at the individual level and no collective creativity. Staff members or sections provide their formulaic input to the current crisis action plan and move to the next

task. All staff officers can fall into this spiritless tedium at some point. I am just as guilty of this as are my peers at BCT and the battalion level.

The last phenomenon and perhaps the most perilous result of staff exhaustion is taking shortcuts. Habit and ennui can make form seem more important than substance, and shortcuts inevitably result. Staffs abandon the MDMP or abbreviate it to such a degree that it does not begin to achieve the planning described in FM 5-0. The most egregious mistake in abbreviating the MDMP is designating one staff officer to come up with a plan. As FM 5-0 describes it, “Planning is a dynamic process of several interrelated activities.” One staff officer may be the action officer, but he or she should not provide the sole input to the plan. Our Army today has a wealth of intelligent and experienced officers; however, few have the knowledge to develop an acceptable, feasible, and complete plan without assistance from other staff members.

Given the rapid operations the Army must conduct in the current operational environment, staffs seek shortcuts to produce concept of operation plans rapidly while executing the MDMP in a time-constrained environment. FM 5-0 recommends that a staff only shorten the MDMP when it understands every step in the process and the requirement to produce the necessary products. FM 5-0 notes that “omitting steps of the MDMP is not a solution” to planning in a time-constrained environment. Key to planning in such an environment is a commander’s direct involvement and the guidance and direction he provides. Without critical input from commanders, staff shortcuts often result in three or four slide presentations of an execution order. Such presentations lack the rigor of a written order and the detail required for coordination and synchronization of myriad assets and capabilities now available on the connected, modern battlefield.

As I composed this article, I sought insights from some wise sages at Fort Leavenworth. One such sage, a Marine Vietnam veteran, summarized the importance of the staff as follows: “The key assets of a good staff are the keenness of its processes, acuity of its insights, its clear and precise articulation of issues and solutions, its boldness and pro-risk-taking orientation appropriate to the situation at hand.” However, when a staff is exhausted, it loses its acuity of insight. It becomes risk adverse



A.P. Jacob Silberberg

**A U.S. Marine pauses during operations in Iraq, August 2005. Staff exhaustion inevitably produces ripple effects for those in daily contact with the enemy.**

because it has lost the acumen to assess risk. All boldness and pride in the job are gone. The Soldier on the battlefield pays.

## Rejuvenating the Staff

What can commanders, staff leaders, and individual staff members do to mitigate or overcome staff exhaustion? The solutions will vary with the staff's composition, the personalities of its members, and unit missions.

Individual staff members have a role in mitigating and overcoming staff exhaustion. Staff members should devise some type of mental, physical, and spiritual fitness plan to help relieve stress and maintain alertness and stamina. Although staff work is not physically exhausting, stress brings on exhaustion that eventually leads to fatigue and illness. Exhaustion in one or two key members of the staff can lower the morale of the entire staff. Making and taking personal time to read a book, watch a movie, or even take a nap can sustain individuals for the "long fight." Attending a religious service can be a reprieve. Each person is different; he must find his own relief and personal recharge mechanism. I found writing this article helped restore some of my creative energy.

Staffs are more than just groups of individuals, however. A staff is a team and must combat staff exhaustion as a team. This might be as simple as a "foot-in-mouth award day," movie night, or extended dinners during periods of lower operational tempo. Building a staff team to participate in athletic events or participating in team sports as part of group physical training offer relief from stress and tedium and are team-building tools. Chaplains can help the staff with stress management. Inspirational messages or "thoughts of the day" can be useful. Staff members should be willing to try something different, such as changing the means or delivery method of briefing the boss. Doing so may help a staff member see something that requires a change "in his lane" or even help energize the entire staff. Leaders should assess risk and mitigate it.

Ultimately, commanders are instrumental in preventing or identifying and overcoming staff exhaustion. Staff exhaustion is a genuine risk, and commanders should have the imagination to implement measures to control or reduce inherent risks rather than take a myopic and shortsighted attitude toward it. Commanders should self-interestedly take the initiative to prevent staff exhaustion from occurring. If it does occur, commanders should recognize it quickly and take action to rectify conditions. They should identify which key staff members are the most susceptible to staff exhaustion and give them some relief. Giving such key staff members a day off will enable them to relax instead of hovering in energy-sapping anticipation of the commander's summons.

Proactively managing the R&R leave of the staff during extended deployments can minimize their exhaustion at work, but balancing mission needs takes a creative commander. It would not be feasible to authorize all key staff members to take R&R leave at the same time so they could all return to

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work rejuvenated. The commander must sequence the leave of his key staff officers with that of his own to ensure the command continues to function and sustain operations during the deployment. Moreover, if the commander sends key staff officers on leave too early, they will become exhausted at the end of the deployment; if he sends them too late, they will lose their creative energy in the middle of the deployment. Commanders must assess the situation with foresight, make a decision, publish it early, and stick with it, even when events on the battlefield evolve, trusting that predictability will minimize the diminishing returns of exhaustion. Army units usually have depth in critical staff sections, and staff members will appreciate the predictability of their leave, be able to manage their expectations and those of their families, and prepare themselves mentally and physically for the duration of the deployment.

Commanders can also overcome staff exhaustion by rotating staff members where possible. At the BCT and battalion levels, public affairs, IO, PSYOP, aviation, military police, personnel, chaplains, and other staff members in select fields are skill-specific and one-deep, so there is no option of rotating these staffers. But commanders can rotate the XO, S3, S4, ECOORD/FSO, and some branch-immaterial staff members such as those in the plans section. Commanders should weigh the advantages of bringing new energy to the staff against the disadvantages of diluting institutional memory of staff functions and command interests. Is this new energy worth the risk of a steeper learning curve for a short time? From the staff officer's perspective, the answer is a resounding yes! The energy gains would far outweigh the loss of expertise, given the team environment it would foster. A BCT commander can rotate staff officers across the BCT, but must consider the impact at the battalion level when electing to do so. During my deployment, I saw this work with varying degrees of success.

Commanders should also consider changing briefing methods. Some commanders abhor slide presentations. Some prefer using the old-fashioned map and pointer system, talking through the challenges and articulating the operation. This older method has advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, staffers will spend more time analyzing

and discussing the information, which could generate additional courses of action. Furthermore, the staff will be more thorough, because it will have to produce written products such as a complete operations order or minutes. On the negative side, this method is time consuming, doesn't take advantage of the digital systems' capabilities, and the products cannot be transmitted to others as rapidly as the digitized briefing.

Commanders can also halt the tedium of daily work by spending time teaching, coaching, and mentoring their staffs. Sacrificing a meeting or briefing to conduct an after-action review to identify areas for improvement and techniques to do so is a calculated risk worth taking. A commander teaching, coaching, and mentoring the staff might be the silver bullet to overcome staff exhaustion. Commanders should never fear going back over ground already covered if the staff has forgotten the lessons learned while crossing it. Sometimes, to get the staff moving again, it takes personal involvement and an attitude adjustment in the form of a paternalistic reminder.

## Conclusion

Warfighting is a dangerous venture. It requires diligence, creativity, intelligence, and perseverance. Success demands synchronizing assets, disseminating intelligence rapidly, and executing orders. The staff plays a greater part than it ever has in the history of combined arms. Prolonged tedium from the barrage of minutia during extended deployments in an information-laden environment can cause systemic staff exhaustion and failure, sometimes with dangerous results.

The three phenomena that occur almost universally due to staff exhaustion—complacency, loss of creative energy, and taking short cuts—introduce risk to the unit's mission. Together and without abatement, the three can be calamitous. Staff members can help identify, prevent, and overcome staff exhaustion, but commanders ultimately have to take the initiative in mitigating this risk, rejuvenating the staff, and providing guidance for subordinate unit plans and orders. Commanders and staffs should work together to achieve synergistic results; they must not fail the young Soldiers who walk point for them. **MR**