



(U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Jacob N. Bailey)

Sgt. Kenneth Strong and his fellow soldiers exit a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter 2 July 2006 during an aerial traffic control point mission near Tal Afar, Iraq. The soldiers are assigned to the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team.

# Operational Resilience in the Infantry Rifle Platoon

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**R**esilience training (sometimes called resiliency training) is a relatively new concept in the U.S. Army.<sup>1</sup> Its purpose and utility are sometimes not well understood by Army leaders who have focused their time and energy for more than a decade on fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those wars led to the development of

new equipment to assist the warfighter, such as the mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle, and new doctrinal and training publications on counterinsurgency. New programs for resilience training, including the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program, were also born out of the wars to provide soldiers psychological tools to cope with the stressful

effects of war and military life—such as posttraumatic stress disorder and suicide.<sup>2</sup>

Most unit leaders ensure they have the correct number of resilience-qualified leaders in their ranks, and they conduct the required annual training. Otherwise, the Army has achieved relatively little integration of resilience training at the small-unit level.<sup>3</sup> Fully integrating resilience training not only arms soldiers with the tools to become more resilient but also creates more productive, efficient, and lethal units with higher morale.

Over the course of a year, our infantry rifle platoon successfully integrated resilience techniques into our day-to-day operations. We found that through constant contact, spot corrections, and group classes, small-unit leaders could integrate operational resilience training effectively. Over time, benefits accrued both to individuals and to the unit as a whole.

## Becoming Believers

Integrating resilience training at the platoon level requires ensuring unit leaders become believers. Generally, leaders who have been around the Army for some time tend to be more resistant to new requirements. Attitudes such as “I didn’t need resilience training when I was coming up, so nobody does,” or variations of that line of thinking, are common.

My platoon sergeant was initially skeptical of resilience training. A three-tour combat veteran of Afghanistan, he dismissed the idea of resilience training as a distraction from our core mission and a waste of time. After attending the two-week Master Resilience Trainer course and implementing some of the resilience techniques in his own life, however, he too became a believer.

I first learned about the Army’s approach to resilience through Module One of the resilience training given to new Army officers, in which a master resilience trainer gives an introductory class on the fundamentals of resilience. The class covers key concepts and tries to get the students to embrace the concepts—to *buy into* the program. As a prior-enlisted infantryman, I found the concept interesting. Problem solving and “thinking about the way we think” were not things we spent a lot of time on during my initial tour between 2001 and 2006, when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were in their infancy. Having left the Army in 2006

(before rejoining in 2011), I experienced first-hand the difficulty of transitioning back to civilian life after fighting a war. The idea that the Army had invested time, money, and organizational energy into giving soldiers tools that might aid in that transition piqued my interest. In short order, I too became a believer.

## Integrating Operational Resilience

Together, my platoon sergeant and I decided we wanted to integrate resilience training in the platoon. When we began discussing how we would accomplish this, we agreed that the worst possible course of action would be simply to give traditional classes on resilience and hope that the message would stick. A better method would be to extract some of the best concepts and usable techniques from resilience training and implement them during everyday operations. We decided that we would set out to integrate resilience activities in three main ways: constant contact, spot corrections, and group classes.

**Constant contact.** Not unlike a mechanical movement, such as changing a rifle magazine or walking under night vision, building resilience requires constant practice. Unfortunately, junior noncommissioned officers cannot simply round up their soldiers and supervise them practicing resilience until they get it right. Most of the hard work happens within the internal monologue of the individual soldier.

To encourage the practice of resilience, leaders need to be ready to engage their soldiers and talk resilience whenever the opportunity presents itself. Soldiers will send cues through their behavior and speech that allow leaders the opportunity to intervene with the right resilience technique. For instance, if a leader finds a soldier falling into a thinking trap such as catastrophizing—making situations appear worse than they are—an opportunity is presented for resilience intervention. Leaders need to remain conscious of resilience training principles and techniques. They should avoid thinking of resilience as an isolated training objective. Instead, they need to think of it as a continuous process linked to all Army tasks.

Additionally, we have found it particularly helpful to get a unit’s “tough” soldiers personally involved. Young soldiers—especially infantrymen—tend to gravitate toward the tobacco-chewing, chip-on-the-shoulder, physical fitness guru. Resilience training, on the other hand, still has a new age, *Men Who Stare at Goats*



(Photo by Pfc. Cameron Boyd, Joint Combat Camera Afghanistan)

A soldier from 2nd Battalion, 237th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, opens his mouth up toward the sky to taste the snow as it falls after a fire fight with the Taliban in the valley of Barawala Kalet, Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 29 March 2011.

stigma.<sup>4</sup> Getting a unit's reputed tough soldiers to serve as the champions of resilience will make getting buy-in from junior soldiers easier.

**Spot corrections.** When soldiers hear the term spot correction, the first things that comes to mind are uniform discrepancies or minor behavioral issues, such as walking while talking on a cell phone. Spot corrections can prevent or mitigate mishaps by ensuring a soldier is wearing a seatbelt or adhering to security and safety standards. The spot correction is the immediate tool used by all soldiers to keep our Army within standards.

The spot correction can also be useful in ensuring soldiers are practicing resilience. When a soldier complains that he or she always fails the sit-up portion of the Army Physical Fitness Test, for instance, the soldier may have fallen into a common thinking trap. The leader has an opportunity to spot correct the soldier to avoid thinking traps. The leader can encourage the soldier to look for the actual source of the problem—likely a poor physical training program. Resilience leaders need to attack any problems that can be addressed with

resilience techniques whenever they arise. Aggressive spot correcting, over time, will result in soldiers who practice resilience when no one is looking.

**Group classes.** Occasionally, it is still helpful to gather the squad or platoon and pitch a resilience class. It does not have to be the full-blown Module One course—it can simply be an appropriate portion of resilience training. Instead of downloading the slides from the Internet and regurgitating them to a bored group of soldiers, scenario-based group discussion is a good technique for teaching resilience to a group. It is one thing to tell a soldier to avoid thinking traps; it is another to show why avoiding them is important.

In day-to-day resilience training, such as spot corrections, the *why* behind useful resilience concepts and techniques can become muddled. Group instruction offers a good way to explain these principles and to explore the potential second- and third-order effects of negative thinking. Periodic group training is also a good way to keep the platoon trainers up-to-date on the latest developments and trends in resilience activities.

## Applied Resilience Techniques

In implementing resilience in the rifle platoon through constant contact, spot corrections, and group classes, the greatest benefits will develop over time as the training and concepts sink in. Much like physical fitness training, the best results come from a good, consistent plan executed over time. This is true of specific resilience techniques as well. Three techniques we found particularly effective are called *avoiding catastrophizing*, *putting it in perspective*, and *hunting the good stuff*.

**Avoiding catastrophizing.** Catastrophizing refers to magnifying or emphasizing the significance of a problem, often out of proportion to the situation. Catastrophizing slowly chips away at a soldier's resilience. In our experience, avoiding catastrophizing has had the greatest impact on building resilience within the platoon.

Army leaders are infamous for catastrophizing. When people preface what they are about to say with "wait until you hear this," "you're not going to believe this," or "I've got some bad news," they are likely catastrophizing. Those types of statements usually send a jolt of adrenaline coursing through the listener's veins, who undoubtedly will begin imagining the worst-case scenario before the message is given. That adrenaline elevates stress levels and negatively affects decision making and overall well-being. Usually, the actual news is not that bad, but the damage has already been done to the listener's nerves and attitude.

Injecting unnecessary commentary or placing a negative value judgment on information that simply needs to be communicated to subordinates changes how they process the information. If a leader communicates that an order is stupid or crazy, the subordinate is likely to see it that way and act accordingly. We observed this while training at the National Training Center in March 2014. Our platoon faced a dynamic, rapidly changing environment that challenged all our leaders' abilities to plan and execute missions. Early in the exercise, the platoon was not being mindful of catastrophizing. When we received a mission from higher headquarters, we communicated it down to the lowest level with judgment-added commentary such as "I know this sounds stupid, but ..." or "You're not going to believe what they want us to do." In our case, when we prefaced orders with commentary, often playfully or with no ill intention, the platoon reacted

with eye rolls or sluggishness. This pattern is not helpful when trying to execute a mission.

Seeing this happening early in the rotation, we decided that we would stop the madness. Whether information made it to us "pre-catastrophized" or with negative commentary from superiors, we stripped it to the facts and communicated it clearly without catastrophizing. We found that soldiers followed orders more energetically and aggressively when we communicated this way.

Later that year, our platoon deployed to Afghanistan. As part of our daily battle rhythm, the platoon leadership met with squad leaders nightly. Like in training exercises, a deployed environment changes rapidly, and it is easy to fall into catastrophizing as a way to curry favor with subordinates or to add entertaining but unnecessary drama to the day. Most likely, the information the platoon leadership received had already been commented on and had negative judgments added the whole way down the chain. It is at the platoon leadership level where it is most important to strip the communication to its facts because the information is about to be communicated down to the executing element—the squad.<sup>5</sup> If anyone has to believe in and support the mission, it is the element responsible for execution.

As our platoon leadership has reinforced resilience over time, our meetings and daily interactions have become more efficient, more cordial, and shorter. Now, we often preface interactions by reminding each other to avoid catastrophizing and just put out the information. Through constant reinforcement, catastrophizing has slowly eroded from our meetings and daily interactions. Information flows more clearly and efficiently.

**Hunting the good stuff and putting it in perspective.** *Hunting the good stuff* refers to thinking of a few things that are going well right now. *Putting it in perspective* is thinking about a problem within the context of the big picture. Hunting the good stuff is a way to focus on good news so that bad news does not seem overwhelming. By putting whatever bad news comes along in perspective of the big picture while being mindful of *the good stuff*, it becomes easier to recognize the bad news for exactly what it is—rather than a paralyzing and stress-inducing problem. Integrating these techniques—avoiding catastrophizing, putting

it in perspective, and hunting the good stuff—into our platoon's battle rhythm has been critical to building operational resilience.

When possible, and when it makes sense, we have tried to incorporate resilience elements into standard training events. Before our platoon takes a physical fitness test, an event commonly accompanied by catastrophizing, we discuss ways to avoid thinking traps and to visualize success—another technique of resilience training. If a soldier is convinced that he always performs poorly on the run, it often becomes a matter of destiny to run poorly. In the days leading up to the event, usually during cool-down stretching, we will discuss techniques that have made other soldiers successful on previous physical fitness tests. Soldiers whose performance in certain events was consistently poor have successfully used resilience techniques to avoid unhelpful thinking traps, and ultimately to improve their performance on physical fitness tests.

During marksmanship training, one of our resilience trainers takes charge of the remedial marksmanship training station. Besides going over basic rifle marksmanship with the soldiers, he integrates resilience elements. Soldiers who start off shooting poorly on a qualification table often get frustrated and consider the iteration a lost cause, which could then lead them to shoot poorly or without enough care as the iteration progresses. Instead of simply focusing on the mechanics of rifle marksmanship (still the most important objective), the resilience trainer emphasizes that missing that first or second shot really does not mean much. A soldier trained to quickly put the event in perspective, in this case by recognizing that a few missed targets does not invalidate the training, can

rapidly move on from a missed target, regain composure, and seize the initiative.

## Conclusion

Resilience training does not compensate for poor military training, nor does it replace good military training. Improving a platoon's results on physical fitness tests or rifle qualification is still primarily a function of a good physical training plan or a solid basic rifle marksmanship program. Integrating resilience training may help, but it is no replacement for the fundamentals.

Perhaps some Army leaders are resistant to adding new training requirements they consider of dubious value in an already crowded schedule. Given how busy our organizations are today, if a commander does not make something a priority, then it is likely to receive minimal attention, if it is not completely ignored. Since resilience training still has a reputation as an ancillary program within the Army, it is all the more important for unit leaders to make implementing it a priority.

In our experience, we have found that most leaders are not resistant to the program, but they just do not know enough about it. Instead of trying



(Photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod, 1st Brigade Combat Team PAO, 82nd Airborne Division)

Second Lt. Mark Lucas, a platoon leader with the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team, briefs his soldiers before a logistics resupply mission 8 July 2012 at Forward Operating Base Arian, Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. Such mission briefs are mandatory for every soldier who will take part in the mission and are good opportunities for reinforcing resilience practices.

to force feed the entire program on busy, over-worked leaders, it is better to explain small parts of resilience over time and let them digest it at their own pace. If their interest is piqued, they will start investigating it on their own and make it a priority for their soldiers.

In addition to some military leaders questioning its practicality or dismissing the Army's program as a distraction, civilian and military resilience programs have their critics.<sup>6</sup> The Army as a whole has yet to show significant benefits.<sup>7</sup> The concerns raised by researchers are worth further exploration, if for no other reason than to ensure that our soldiers are receiving the best possible training.

With all this in mind, we found that integrating resilience in our infantry rifle platoon with these approaches has had a noticeable effect on platoon

operations. This, in turn, has had a direct impact on platoon morale and efficiency.

Integrating resilience training at the platoon level will require a deliberate and sustained effort over enough time to bear fruit. The effects are difficult to see immediately, but over time the lessons become ingrained as any military custom or norm. Where we once needed our resilience leaders to correct soldiers when they were stuck in a thinking trap or were guilty of catastrophizing, now our most junior soldiers are reminding each other to hunt the good stuff and to put it in perspective. As a result, the platoon is more resilient and disciplined, and a disciplined platoon is a more lethal platoon. Enhancing mission readiness is the prime objective of all military training, and integrating resilience training at the platoon level can help achieve that goal. ■

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## Notes

1. Brian B. Feeney, Ph.D., "CSF2 Sees Culture of Resilience Growing in Army Family," The Official Homepage of the United States Army, <http://www.army.mil/article/109529/> (accessed 23 February 2015). The Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2) program was launched in 2008 by then Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey to address the stressors of military service and repeat deployments. In 2013, the original CSF2 program became the main effort of a broader program known as the Ready and Resilient (R2) Campaign.

2. Terri Tanielian and Lisa H. Jaycox, eds., *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND\\_MG720.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG720.pdf) (accessed 19 February 2015). This report claims that about 20 percent of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan report symptoms of PTSD; Michael Schoenbaum, et al., "Predictors of Suicide and Accident Death in the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (ARMY STARRS): Results From the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Army STARRS)," *Journal of the American Medical Association*

*Psychiatry* 71(5) (May 2014): 493-503. Research into military suicide does not show that the rise is simply due to the pressures of deployment.

3. The first four modules of resilience training emphasize individual skills and techniques.

4. *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, directed by Grant Heslov (Smokehouse Pictures, 2009), DVD (2010). This fictional war comedy film is loosely based on the 2004 nonfiction book of the same name by Jon Ronson about the U.S. military's attempt to use psychic powers.

5. Maj. Gen. Robert B. Brown, "The Infantry Squad: Decisive Force Now and in the Future," *Military Review* (November-December 2011).

6. Roy Eidelson, "The Dark Side of 'Comprehensive Soldier Fitness'" *Dangerous Ideas* blog, *Psychology Today* online, 25 March 2011, [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dangerous-ideas/201103/the-dark-side-comprehensive-soldier-fitness](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dangerous-ideas/201103/the-dark-side-comprehensive-soldier-fitness) (accessed 19 February 2015).

7. See the Army STARRS website for ongoing Army research on mental health risk and resilience, <http://www.armystarrs.org/> (accessed 23 February 2015).