Influence of IED Attacks on Leadership: Dealing with the Invisible Enemy

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Sweden has a long history, dating back to pre-World War I days, of participation in international peace support action.[1] Its contribution to United Nations operations started as early as 1948 when Swedish military observers were sent to the Middle East. The first Swedish battalion under the UN flag was deployed in Gaza during the 1956 Suez crisis. In 1960, its UN involvement increased through the contribution of troops for the UN operation in the Congo. In subsequent decades, Swedish forces have served in Africa, the Western Balkan region and, most recently, in Afghanistan, where they have been responsible for a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif since 2006.

Afghanistan differs from other countries with which Sweden has had involvement as the context is more clearly characterized by irregular warfare and counterinsurgency than on previous occasions. Recent studies conducted in this type of context (notably Iraq and, precisely, Afghanistan) have mostly focused on psychological trauma and other mental health problems[2] but not on leadership aspects on both direct and indirect levels.[3]

Many stressors in irregular warfare operations are comparable to those in peacekeeping operations but some aspects of stress can differ.[4] Asnani, Pandey & Tripathi documented that in areas distinguished by irregular warfare, the level of stress in soldiers is higher than in areas of peacekeeping.[5] This is said to be due to the dangerous environment, firm discipline, insufficient social interaction, overload of risky tasks, and emotional instability. Farley & Veitch describe soldiers in peacekeeping operations (Bosnia) experiencing stressors similar to those experienced in irregular warfare (Afghanistan), but found that unit climate factors operated in a different way.[6] Improvement in cohesion led to reduced strain in peacekeeping units but not in combat operation units.

Irregular threats such as suicide bombers and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) are more common in a context characterized by irregular warfare than in that of peacekeeping. In recent years, both the frequency and power of IED attacks have escalated in Afghanistan,

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[1] Early examples include a third-party intervention in 1903-1904 during a rebellion in Macedonia, where officers from the Swedish-Norwegian Union acted as inspectors, and a 1911-1915 episode in Persia where Swedish gendarmes made the highways safe for civilians and trade caravans.

[2] Erbes, Curry & Leskala, 2009 ; Friedman, 2006 ; Hoge, Castro, Messer, McGurk, Cotting & Koffman, 2004.

[3] Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio & Cavarretta, 2009.

[4] Farley & Catano, 2006.

[5] Asnani, Pandey & Tripathi, 2003.

[6] Farley & Catano, 2006.

even in northern Afghanistan, which has been considered to be comparatively calm.[7] The number of fatalities by IEDs has increased from zero in 2001 and 20 in 2005 to 368 in 2010.[8] As far as the authors are aware, no research has been done regarding IED attacks and their influence on leadership.

In view of the shortage of studies directly focusing on leadership in connection with IED attacks, we will now review recent research on military leadership in extreme environments more generally. Beginning with *demands on leadership*, Hannah *et al.* (2009) argue that leaders in extreme contexts must handle four contextual dimensions : (1) *location in time* – the content of successful leadership can vary over the stages of preparation, response and recovery from an extreme situation, and leaders must also handle shifts from stable to extreme and back again ; (2) *magnitude and probability of consequences* – in order for the context to be considered extreme, individuals must perceive the consequences of a threat to be possible and as the probability of threatening consequences increases, the need for capable leaders is also enhanced ; (3) *proximity* – a leader's impact on subordinates may vary depending on the physical distance between them and leaders need to balance proximity to subordinates in order to both maintain authority and be receptive to questions ; and (4) *form of threat* – different threats (physical, psychological, or material) give rise to different reactions (e.g. post-traumatic stress, mortality salience, self-esteem-based responses) which in turn require different leadership responses.

Continuing the review with other *context-typical characteristics*, Kolditz (2007) claims that leadership in extreme environments is more dependent on trust and loyalty than leadership in more normal settings. Hurst makes a similar observation and argues that after being involved in critical incidents, subordinates tend to feel more vulnerable and are more likely to scrutinize their leader, making trust indispensable in this type of context.[9]

Moving on to what could be called *evidence-based favourable leadership* in extreme environments, the classical division between task- and person-related leadership can serve as a basis for a brief research review. Beginning with task-related aspects, leaders are seen as more effective during critical incidents if they provide initiating structure and take prompt and decisive action.[10] Leaders also need to be flexible and adapt to rapidly changing conditions.[11] A strong attentional focus on the external situation is favourable, which at the same time means no or limited focus on one's own emotions during the intense response phase.[12]

In relation to the interpersonal side of leadership, leaders are recommended to use transformational leadership by displaying care for subordinates' welfare, to inspire through

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[7] Wright, 2006.

[8] iCasualties, 2011.

[9] Hurst, 1995.

[10] Flanagan & Levy, 1952 in Hanna *et al.*, 2010.

[11] Yammarino, Mumford, Connelly & Dionne, 2010.

[12] Kolditz, 2007.

leading from the front, and to induce subordinates that they are a part of a larger picture and mission.[13] Leaders need to be perceived as authentic (honest),[14] approachable, and good communicators.[15] Kolditz also observes that subordinates in this context tend to be highly motivated, and, drawing on Weick's theories, warns that leaders who add excitement to a situation through motivation can intensify fear among subordinates.

We conclude this research review by summarizing some studies on the *effects of leadership* in extreme conditions. At a general level, Farley and Catano conclude that leadership is an important social support system.[16] Bartone points out that leaders may have substantial influence over subordinates' meaning-making process and how they interpret stressful experiences,[17] while Weick similarly highlights the opportunity for leaders to provide subordinates with a sense of meaning.[18] Leaders can also affect the expectancies of subordinates and have a normalizing effect on their stress responses by mediating that the experienced reactions are understandable and manageable.[19]

Further, effective leadership has been shown to play an important role in managing subordinates' stress reactions, and in contributing to fewer psychiatric casualties in combat. Campbell, Campbell & Ness (2008) also suggest that leaders can affect how subordinates respond to danger by acting like "resilience reservoirs" that support their resilience. However, Lyons (2007) warns that it can be dangerous to put too much onus on leaders to consider the health of subordinates, as it may cause them to feel guilty if they fail to impact positively.

Although the findings presented might serve as helpful tools for examining leadership in extreme contexts, the lack of research specifically focusing on IED threats in irregular warfare warrants an explorative approach. The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of leadership in military operations characterized by the presence of such critical incidents.

Method

Participants

The selection of participants followed the guidelines of grounded theory and was governed by a desire to find informants with a wide variety of experiences.[20] Twenty-one Swedish military and civilian informants who had served in Afghanistan during the period 2005-2008 participated in the study. The informants represented (a) indirect leaders (the highest Swedish commanders in Afghanistan at the time of the incident, i.e. commanding

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[13] Bass, 2006 ; Yammarino *et al.*, 2010.

[14] Kolditz, 2007.

[15] Burgess, Riddle, Hall & Salas, 1992.

[16] Farley & Catano, 2006.

[17] Bartone, 2005 ; Bartone, 2006.

[18] Weick, 1988, p.310.

[19] Harrison, Sharpley & Greenberg, 2008.

[20] Glaser & Strauss, 1967.

officers), (b) direct leaders (team/ troop leaders for the teams involved in incidents), (c) subordinates involved in incidents, (d) subordinates who were part of the team but not directly involved in incidents, and (e) individuals who were not part of the team involved but part of the unit. The number of informants was determined by the criterion of conceptual saturation. As the last performed interviews did not contribute with new aspects or findings, additional interviews were not conducted.

All participants were males between the ages of 25-50. Sixteen were military officers (lieutenants to colonels), one was a soldier and four were civilians (such as nurses and operating staff). Ten had previously served in Afghanistan and/ or other operations, while eleven had no prior experience of international military operations.

The participants belonged to three different units that had been exposed to different incidents during their service in Afghanistan, two of the units being temporary and assembled for the specific six-month mission, the third being regular (Special Forces). Once the commanding officers had consented to participate, they were asked to choose an incident which had greatly impacted on them and on other individuals involved, and also asked to suggest which subordinates might be relevant to our study. As a result the 'snowball' sampling method was implemented.

The incidents reported in the study were IED attacks in which Swedish personnel were killed, injured or survived without injury. The groups involved were sometimes also subject to other attacks, such as those made with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs).

Data Collection

Data were collected by interviews, following a prepared interview guide. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and individually adapted follow-up questions covering the following themes : background questions, motivation (motive for international service, and what influenced it), the incident (course of events, reactions), situation awareness (risk perception, commanders' intent), decision-making (priorities, lodestar, etc.), trust (before, during, and after the mission; trust-building behaviours). Since there seems to be a lack of research on this specific type of threat (IED attacks), the themes in the interview guide were chosen because they have proven to be significant in previous studies of leadership in dangerous contexts.[21]

The interviews took place over a year (March 2008-March 2009) at the informants' or authors' work places in Sweden. The interviews were recorded and generally lasted about 90-180 minutes. All interviews were conducted and analyzed by the authors.

Data Analysis

A small number of interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed before repeating the process with additional interviews – a procedure that facilitated the development

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[21] See for example Kolditz, 2007, pp.1-21 ; Larsson, Haerem, Sjöberg, Alvinius & Bakken, 2007.

of the emerging core variable. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to the constant comparative method introduced by Glaser and Strauss, the first step being the "open coding process".[22] Data were examined line by line in order to identify the informants' descriptions of actions, thought patterns and feelings associated with the interview themes. The derived codes were formulated in words resembling those used by the informants, for example, the statement 'especially when you jump out of what's left of your car and you're looking for a target to deal with and it's a frustration in itself – you don't find one', was coded as "The Invisible Enemy". Codes were then compared to verify their descriptive content and to confirm that they were based in the data.

The second step involved sorting the codes into different categories. The above example: "The invisible enemy" was sorted into the category "Appraisal/Sense-Making". This was done by making constant comparisons of interview transcriptions, codes, and categories, also analyzing codes and categories with respect to the selection criteria, meaning that comparisons were made between the different roles occupied by the informants. The analysis up to this point had been carried out by one of the authors. However, in order to enhance reliability, the second author subsequently scrutinized the codes and categories and after consultation with the first author, a few codes were replaced.

The third and last step was conducted in close dialogue between the authors, and consisted of fitting the categories together, using the constant comparative method. In practice, the steps of analysis were not strictly sequential; rather, we moved backwards and forwards in constantly re-examining interview data, codes, and categories. This resulted in a hypothetical model of the influence of IED attacks on leadership.
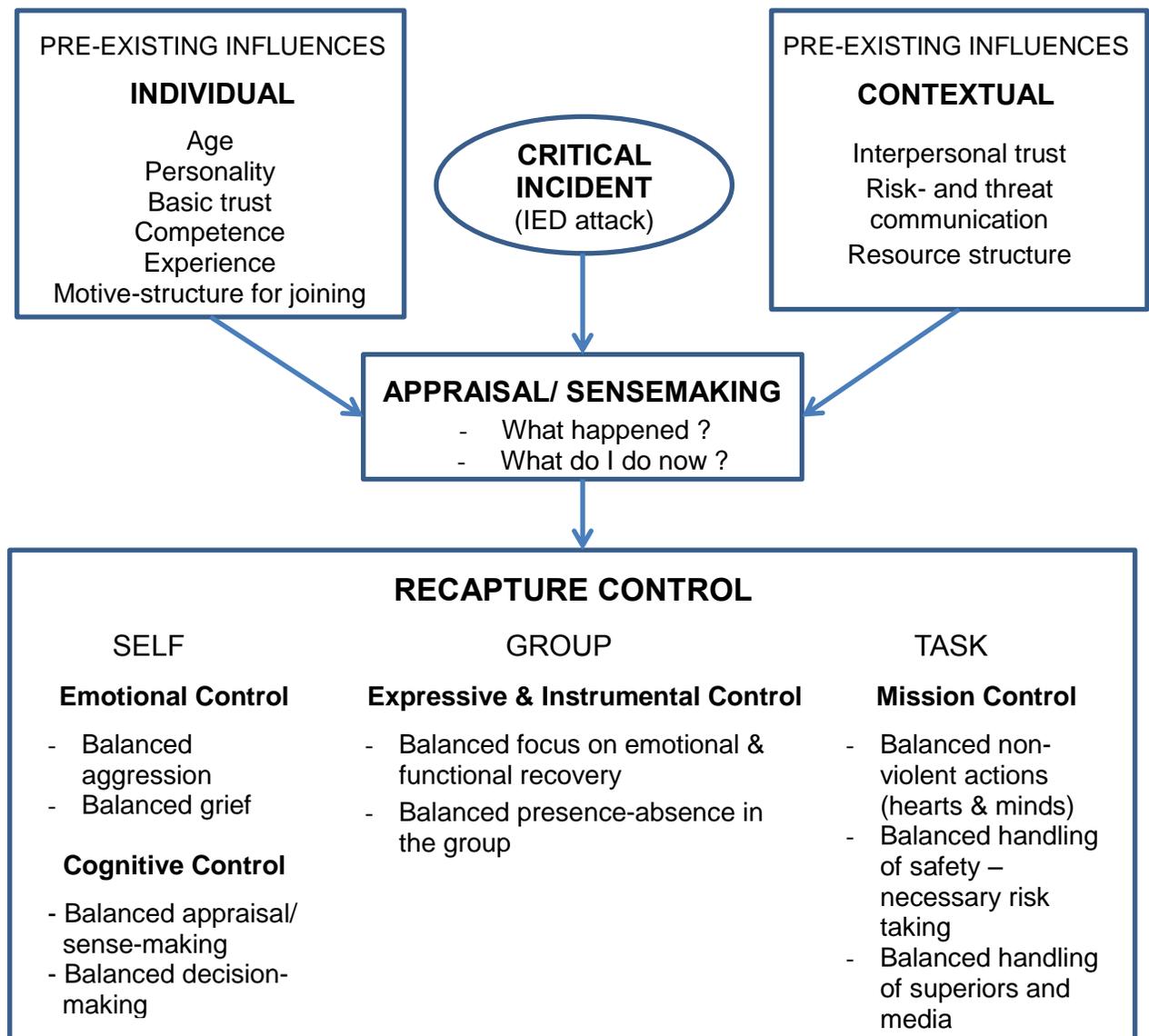
Results

The outcome of the analysis of the informants' interview responses was a theoretical model of core aspects of military leadership immediately following an IED attack (see Figure 1 below). The results section starts with a general overview of the model, followed by a detailed presentation of the different parts.

When an IED attack occurs during a military operation, leaders try to recapture control over themselves, the group, and/or the task. These efforts are influenced by appraisal and sense-making processes during the incident (how the situation is construed) which in turn are influenced by general pre-existing influences (individual and contextual) as well as by the critical incident. A means of recapturing control over self could be emotional control (balanced aggression and balanced grief), for example, giving vent to frustration without letting it lead to a dysfunctional desire for revenge, or allowing oneself to grieve despite fear of losing authority. Cognitive control (balanced appraisal/ sense-making and balanced decision-making) involves, for example, being observant of potential opponents without interpreting every local as an enemy, or having the confidence to make less-informed

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[22] Glaser & Stauss, 1967.

decisions when needed, without acting incautiously. Gaining control of the group involves expressive and instrumental control in terms of a balanced focus on emotional and functional recovery and a balanced presence or absence in the group. Examples of this include allowing group members to feel bad without tolerating it to the point of negative impact on functionality, or showing support by being present without affecting the group's freedom of action. Recapturing control of the task means taking control over the mission (balancing risks and action in non-violent actions, taking necessary risks without jeopardizing safety, and handling superiors and the media). Examples of this include trying to win hearts and minds without jeopardizing subordinates' safety, venturing subordinates to patrol uncertain areas or deciding whether or not to deal with the media from the field.

Figure 1 : *Model of the core aspects of military leadership*
immediately following an IED attack

General Pre-Existing Influences

This part of the results reporting will be less detailed than the presentation of the model components Appraisal/Sense-Making and Recapture Control. The reason for this is that the influence of pre-existing conditions was not the main focus of the study and, following from this, we have less data to substantiate these codes and categories.

Individual Aspects

Individual characteristics such as age, personality, basic trust, competence, experience, and motive-structure for joining appeared to affect perceptions of incidents. A summary of such aspects observed in the interviews follows in the section below.

Age

Typical comments underpinning the 'Age' category emphasized that the participants' views on doing international service changed as they grew older. A more naïve view of thinking that one could change the world seemed to dominate among younger participants, gradually evolving into a more practical and realistic view among older ones. This age-related view of thinking appears to affect motives for joining military operations which in turn seem to affect reactions after IED attacks.

Personality

Informants stated that individuals perceived as 'sensation-seekers' more easily become bored during the operation, something that appears to have a connection with inexperience. Let us illustrate: "*That kind of general motivation in the form of 'I want to go out and do stuff where it's happening', it's, so to speak, a bit about being a little wet behind the ears, a rookie sentiment that dies down a bit afterwards*". Being high on the trait 'sensation-seeking' appeared to indicate a risk of a propensity to quit after an IED attack (see below).

Basic trust

Individuals have varying abilities and propensity to generally trust in others. The data shows that there seems to be a continuum between two extreme standpoints : the glass is full *versus* the glass is empty. The first indicates that a person enters a relationship trusting another individual until that person does something to jeopardize the trust, while the latter represents an attitude of others having to prove by action that they can be trusted. The level of trust that individuals have developed in their leaders and group members when an IED attack happens seems to affect their actions during and after the incident (see below).

Competence

This model category refers to acquired competence. Some of the individuals have specialist competences such as skills in medicine (nurses, doctors, etc.), technology or leadership. One's competence might influence appraisal and sense-making during IED attacks (e.g., a leader takes more responsibility and adopts a safety mindset : see below).

Experience

Different experiences appear to influence expectations of the mission, leaders, team-members, and the task. Real-life experiences contribute to other expectations than expectations based on fiction : for example, individuals who are not familiar with military organization may have gained their expectations from watching movies or reading books. Limited experience of the military or defective expectations may lead to stronger stress reactions when involved in IED attacks.

Motive Structure for Joining

The most frequent response concerning motive was adventure, excitement, and experience (younger individuals appear to be overrepresented in this motive category), but statements in the interview material suggest that a strong internal motivator may be connected to self-image and pride. Doing international service can be seen as an endeavour to achieve one's ideal self, i.e. the conception of self as one would most like to be. Other motives may be more strongly linked to another aspect of the self-image, the mirror self/ reflected self, which is how the individual thinks that others perceive him/ her. If the self-image is to a great extent about being a military officer, the individual will do what is required to maintain this image. Motives appear to have an influence on how individuals react when they are the object of IED attacks. More about this in the sections below.

Contextual aspects

Perceptions of the incident also appear to be influenced by pre-existing contextual influences. The following ones emerged in the analysis in the present case : interpersonal trust, risk- and threat communication and resource structure. These are presented in the section below.

Interpersonal trust

According to the analysis of the interview responses, the person who is to be trusted, the trustee, is judged by others on three factors : (1) *individual characteristics* such as if the person is perceived as confident, calm or responsible; (2) *task competence*, such as if the person is able to manage his/ her position ; and (3) *competence in battle*, such as if the person is perceived to be able to handle a dangerous and risky situation.

Trust is stated to be of utmost importance since it is the foundation on which to overcome fears and risks. What is most important for trusting someone is personal and varies from individual to individual. However, a common denominator seems to be that lack of trust is constantly described with reference to individual characteristics and not to lack of competence. After involvement in an IED attack, both stress and insufficient trust may lead to conflicts which can have an unfavourable effect on recovery and task-solving (see below).

Risk- and Threat Communication

The informants stated that, during pre-mission training, the issue of risk- and threat awareness was raised but the discussion failed to touch on emotional aspects. Leaders at higher hierarchical levels are an exception here, as they reported discussing what to expect and how to prepare when it came to potential casualties.

The procedure by which risks and threats are communicated appears to have a drawback in that, according to informants, the mediated operational picture was often portrayed as more dangerous than the reality they came to face in Afghanistan. The mediated picture creates expectations that result in reduced motivation when these are not fulfilled. Incorrect expectations based on risk- and threat communication may prohibit individuals from being as mentally prepared as possible when they are exposed to IED attacks.

Resource Structure

Informants stated that the unit was rarely provided with sufficient and critical resources in order to solve tasks and prevent casualties. Indirect leaders describe how they had to bend the rules with the intention of ensuring procurement of important resources. Others report that they had insufficient numbers of armoured cars, and in some cases, vacancies were filled with individuals with inadequate competence. This appears to have a significant effect on how leaders are able to recapture control after IED attacks.

Appraisal/Sense-Making

This model category deals with subordinates' and leaders' appraisal and sense-making when an IED attack occurs. Perceptions and reactions were generally the same for both subordinates and leaders. The category consists of two sub-categories dealing with appraisal/ sense-making:

(1) What Happened?

This part consists of two codes:

(a) The Sound

When an IED detonated, individuals in exposed cars initially seemed to recognize the sound as coming from something they could relate to, like a hand grenade rather than an IED. When the incident occurred, the individuals' state of mind immediately preceding it appeared to affect how they interpreted the situation. Individuals who activated a security mindset (for example, a soldier in charge of checking for potential threats, or a leader who sensed a vehicle was moving too fast and seconds before the incident told the driver to slow down), seemed to understand the situation was serious more quickly than individuals who were joking or relaxing when it occurred.

(b) The Invisible Enemy

Individuals in exposed cars appeared to experience anger, making them look for and expect to see enemies to strike back at:

> I had time to think quite a few things – yes, everything from, soon someone's gonna shoot me and I'll shoot back – because we pretty much had adrenaline rage or whatever you call it. You almost wanted someone to shoot at.

Initially, it never occurred to the informants that the situation would lack present, visible enemies.

(2) What Do I Do Now?

This part consists of three codes:

(a) Misdirected Suspicion

In the studied cases, no enemies were present when the IEDs detonated. When enemies could not be found, a feeling of frustration was apparent. In some cases, local people close to the incident site were often perceived as potential threats, and informants commonly stated that 'it was lucky I didn't shoot them':

> We went bloody ballistic, especially when you jump out of what's left of your car and you're looking for a target to deal with and it's a frustration in itself – you don't find one. So there's no avenue for this frustration and the first farmer we come across we sort out there and then, but he could have just as easily been shot because you're so enraged that someone is trying to do this to you.

(b) Trust Affects Actions during Incidents

When a critical incident occurred, the level of trust that individuals had thus far developed in their leaders, subordinates and group members could affect responses to the situation. For example, trust appeared to affect risk perception in both positive and negative ways. Daring to act was deemed positive while lack of caution was deemed negative. When trust existed in the group, everyone could do their work and take initiatives, being confident that team members could handle the situation. Lack of trust, on the other hand, could mean not letting someone act without controlling what they did, and during the incident every personal resource could become indispensable. For instance:

> The first car was blasted to kingdom come. My first thought was that we have at least four dead here. (…) I pulled my handbrake, told my partner to sit still, and got out. (…) Immediately after I got out onto the road, I figured that the others were behind me, so I didn't watch my back. I looked ahead. (…). I also thought that if they start shooting at me, I won't hit them. No, I wasn't worried. My friends would take care of them. Some of the best riflemen around. So I wasn't worried about that at all, at that moment.

The quote above illustrates how both lack of trust and strong trust in others can be expressed during one and the same incident. While the informant did not trust the person sitting next to him to act, he displayed complete trust in the leader and team members in the cars behind, which appears to have caused him act incautiously. Contrary to his training, he acted without waiting for support. This indicates that a strong level of trust can have a negative impact on risk-taking.

(c) Trust in Medical Care – Responsibility

A number of comments reflected high levels of trust in paramedics and medical care. One officer described it this way:

> What we thought was – damn, what the hell's happened? We've sorted it anyway, there'll be big repercussions for the wounded but all of them will survive, I'm sure of that. (…) It felt like everything would be all right if we only got them all to hospital.

Another aspect of the above is responsibility. Once the injured were taken into medical care, responsibility for them was no longer with the officer, affording him the chance to relax and hope for a positive outcome.

Recapture Control

This is the model category that is underpinned by most data. It describes how the leader tries to recapture control over self, the group, and the task by balancing different needs, demands, and requests that spring from the situation, subordinates and superiors. Although this part focuses on the leader's attempts to recapture control, there were often no obvious differences between the leader's and the subordinates' reactions, implying that several aspects of this control phase may be applicable to subordinates as well.

Self – Emotional Control

This model category focuses on the leader's efforts to control his own emotions and needs and consists of two sub-categories:

(1) *Balanced aggression*

This sub-category consists of two codes:

(a) Desire for vengeance

When the situation had calmed down, thoughts about mortality emerged. More thought was given to the risk situation, with feelings of anxiety and helplessness as a consequence – feelings that were shared by leaders and subordinates alike. A great frustration related to this is reflected in the informants' perception that it was stressful not to be able to see the enemy or protect themselves. Their helplessness seemed to transform into feelings of meaninglessness:

"*What are we doing here ? They can kill us when they want to*". Feelings of anger and aggression were common, as was a strong desire for vengeance. A quote to illustrate :

> Some of the group, me included sometimes, some days – the way I say it now, it sounds like we're some crazy bunch of Rambos – we just simply wanted to shoot someone, you know what I mean ? Not just some random person but the ones behind this. Before, you saw [American soldiers in Iraq]. How can they do this? Now I know why, I feel for them. Of course I feel for the civilians in Iraq – they don't deserve this but the soldiers don't deserve it either.

The frustration experienced was very often misdirected and everyone became suspect:

> But then when this happened, there was this real frustration and anger towards someone you can't identify. It could've been anyone. And after a number of these incidents, you know, obviously you, if I say so myself, that you kind of stop trusting the locals. And sometimes of course this wasn't fair. We sort of bottled it up, yes, like, "yep I'm shaking hands with you today but were you the one who was out last night burying mines? Or, are you the one shooting at us with RPG or something else ?".

(b) Shift of Focus

When talking about the time immediately after an incident, perhaps the most common sentiment from leaders was, "*everyone was highly motivated and eager to get to work*." Nevertheless, when analyzing the statements, motivation appeared to shift from the task to finding out "*who did this and why ?*". The leaders themselves were also often occupied by these kinds of thoughts, making it difficult to balance their own aggression and that of subordinates. It seems that this shift of focus was not noticed until later (i.e. after the operation).

(2) *Balanced Grief*

This sub-category is formed by the code 'Grief'. Several comments dealt with the initial grief process in case of death. Handling the grief of others while trying to deal with one's own seemed to be one of the hardest issues a leader was confronted with when an incident resulted in death. Without the experience or mental preparedness, it could be difficult to find the right words and face "*a room full of grown-up men crying*". When a leader was uncomfortable with the situation, it was easy to make lots of promises and give false hope with the aim of giving comfort.

Individuals involved in fatal accidents could be confronted with feelings of guilt and therefore seemed to have a great need for confirmation that they had made the right decisions and acted the right way. Receiving confirmation from leaders or subordinates tended to increase motivation and help the individual to focus on upcoming tasks. One way leaders tried to handle the situation was by getting people to talk about the incident and the deceased. Not allowing people to walk outside alone, was another important measure. Still another method was to show subordinates it was acceptable to cry. At the same time, leaders said they held

back their own tears since it is the leader's job to "*pull himself together*". A troop leader explained :

> I don't know if it would have been a good thing to fully show my emotions at the scene down there ; I was probably a bit afraid of not being able to control my grief properly if I let it surface and take hold.

According to several interview responses, focusing on work tasks was a contributing reason for individuals prolonging their initial grief process. Let us illustrate :

> I'd say we never started our grieving process – if you can call it that – because we were still working. I was still the boss, had things to sort out. So, we hadn't detached ourselves from our professional roles, so to speak.

It was noted that the leader should also focus attention on those indirectly involved in the fatal incident. Statements in the interview material show that individuals who were not at the scene of the incident could experience severe guilt. For instance :

> I … did what I could. Maybe it wasn't the cleverest thing to do but I did something anyway. Then you can live with it. Those who didn't do anything because they never got the chance, they're always going to, not always but for a number of years they're probably going to ask themselves, "Could I have done something different? Could I have done more?" But I don't have any qualms about that.

Self – Cognitive Control

This model category describes the leader's cognitive control efforts. It consists of two sub-categories :

(1) *Balanced Appraisal/ Sense-Making*

This sub-category consists of two codes:

(a) Fear of Death

The reactions after a 'closely occurred incident' (the IED is discovered before detonation) may be stronger and the psychological experience greater than in an actual incident (the IED is detonated). Being 'close' triggered 'worst-case fantasies' and both those involved and other group members reported thinking that death would have been inevitable if the IED had detonated. A leader explained:

> I think that's the hardest thing – because we were so damned close to it and then it really dawns on you when, I don't know if I should call it a coincidence, well it was a coincidence that I dropped my gaze just then, that the sun shone through just then – this is what I've been telling myself – that it was meant to be, otherwise – it was lying there right in our path.

For leaders it became an important task to overcome their own as well as subordinates' fear of death. This was a necessity to be able to fulfil the mission.

(b) Initial Motives Affect Reactions

After an IED attack, individuals' motivation generally tended to decrease. One unit commander described it in the following words : "*Yep, somewhere there* [the time after the incident] *our motivation sank. There was the question whether this was something Sweden should really continue with*". Individuals tended to react to critical incidents differently, depending on their initial motives. It appears that those with the motive of purposefulness or altruism also handled incidents better since they could stay focused on the goal or felt that they were needed. Those with self-image related motives (for example individuals who joined because it was expected of a military officer or because they felt that serving in Afghanistan was the 'coolest thing a Swedish officer could do') did not feel they were worth risking their lives for. A leader explained:

> I suppose it was the first time I thought that's enough now – to hell with it. Because then it felt like it had started from afar and then it had got closer and closer and closer right until they were so close, like they were shooting the building with RPG. It was like, to hell with this – I give up now, it's not bloody worth it anymore.

Different motives for taking part in international operations became more visible for others through conversations after an incident, and could lead to disagreements between leaders and their subordinates, if their motives conflicted. For example, a leader who was in Afghanistan to gain experience in order to obtain another appointment had problems dealing with subordinates who were there for adventure.

(2) *Balanced Decision-Making*

This sub-category consists of two codes :

(a) Immediate Decision-Making

The distance to the core of the incident seemed to influence how individuals reacted and made decisions. Those in exposed vehicles, or the ones closest, tended to react without thinking while those further back had time to reflect before acting. This implies that the closest individuals shape the course of events and the others merely have to adapt to the arisen situation. Another example of how distance influences decision-making is that while those in exposed cars looked for enemies, those in the cars behind had a tendency to dismiss characters in their surroundings as no threats. If someone in the front dismissed a potential threat, others tended to trust this person's judgment based on the fact that he 'would not have acted that way if he did not judge the situation to be safe'. This is an example of how trust not only affects risk perception but also decision-making:

> At the same time we saw how a shot-down power line was lying on the ground, sparking, and a large pool of fuel had leaked out of the tank that had been shot to bits, so something had to be done fast. I didn't need to make any decisions in this case, but he [the one in the car in front] did. He made an immediate judgment that it was OK to run over there [to the car], which he did without anyone shooting at him. So we assessed the situation to be quiet.

Tunnel vision appears to have led to decisions being made based on symbols in the immediate surroundings : a stranger without a weapon was not a threat, blood was associated with the most severely wounded, someone who was not bleeding was not perceived as injured, although later they may have been found to be.

(b) Motivation-Enhancing Actions

Creating objectives and making decisions without delay after incidents appeared to be important. Informants reported how they felt at their lowest before learning to give new directives, giving subordinates a task or an objective that could help them focus. Nevertheless, the uncertainty of the situation sometimes prohibited prompt decision-making. Since subordinates were concerned about their own safety, involving them in the decision-making also appeared to be important – participation alleviated fear and increased motivation.

Group – Expressive and Instrumental Control

This model category describes the leader's efforts to recapture control over the group, including both expressive and instrumental aspects. The category is composed of two sub-categories :

(1) *Balanced Focus on Emotional and Functional Recovery*

This part consists of the following codes :

(a) Immediate Priorities

Being the direct leader of a group involved in an incident meant being confronted with different immediate stressful priorities, like trying to deal with locals gathering on the scene, trying to start an investigation, relaying information to higher command and supporting subordinates. Initially, relaying information to higher leaders was often perceived to be impossible, as it would mean putting the group in danger ; most important was to inform them of whether or not someone was injured. When the situation calmed down, the leaders seemed to prioritize communication with higher levels and often felt inadequate in dealing with the stress reactions of group members. Leaders were often personally involved in the incidents, which meant they had to deal with their own reactions as well as leadership issues.

(b) Dealing with Subordinates' Desire for Vengeance

As stated above, individuals often experienced a great desire for vengeance. Several informants stated that they stopped caring about why they were in Afghanistan, and that neither the country nor the locals mattered. As mentioned, leaders were also occupied with their own feelings of revenge and it therefore became difficult for them to help subordinates deal with similar feelings and prevent these from interfering with their fulfilment of duties. One important measure was to make room for recovery since these incidents increased stress levels. However, the heavy work load following the incidents made this difficult.

(c) Consequences of Trust Problems

When trust issues arose, the group initially tended to ignore them because there was not enough time to deal with them. For example:

> You can only take so much shit. It's like, if it had been a quiet mission, then maybe we would have been able to have that discussion and deal with the arguments in a different way but you have too much other crap to think about, too. Yeah, like, you have to just go with the cards you've been dealt with because you haven't got the strength to take on another battle on the side, like. In a way, maybe it's a bit of this thing that the outside enemy is what gels us together too.

Group members' avoidance of each other can result in decreased motivation and poor group performance but leaders can tend to overlook this in favour of carrying out urgent tasks. Several statements describe how irritation was often taken out on the leader when trust in him was low. Conflicts between a leader and subordinates are undesirable since the subordinates' need of leader support is higher after a critical incident. Nevertheless, a deputy leader can sometimes successfully take over the support role, if the leader is occupied or not trusted.

It would also appear that prior perceptions of how a leader should be change after involvement in critical incidents. These situations give rise to other needs from the leader, for example, consideration and encouragement.

(2) *Balanced Presence-Absence in the Group*

Three codes are involved here:

(a) Lead or Delegate

Indirect leaders were also confronted with different prioritization dilemmas, chiefly regarding whether to lead or delegate. If the incident occurred in a province distant from the camp, it was sometimes easier to delegate the coordination and responsibility to the direct leader in charge on the scene. However, since military leaders are instructed to fight side by side with their subordinates, it appeared difficult for them to remain on the sidelines without feeling like poor leaders. Nevertheless, involvement in the afflicted group had its drawbacks, as subordinate leaders and the team always appeared to want to unravel the situation themselves. If a higher leader decided to join the team, it was important he did not undermine the authority of the direct leader. Not wanting to involve the higher leader is a phenomenon that seems to occur at every organizational level.

(b) Being Present or Not

As described earlier, it seems leaders did not want higher leaders to be too involved in their work; yet this did not mean they did not want them to be present. The distance between camp (or command) and field could be perceived as great, contributing to a feeling of isolation. A symbolic gesture of meeting with the group after the incident could thus be interpreted as an act of consideration on the part of the indirect leader, although such a meeting should still be kept short.

(c) Debriefing

Once subordinates had been involved in an IED attack, the indirect leader wanted to support and provide them with necessary tools, for example, debriefing. The informants reported that while they did not feel any need to talk to an outsider, there was an apparent need to discuss the incident but only with their primary group or closest family (over the telephone). The fact that the leader provides an opportunity to talk to a priest, for example, is often appreciated (even if the offer is not taken up), but not always. We illustrate:

> I was summoned to a meeting (…) and there's a priest sitting there and a psychologist and the guy who's in charge of the contingent. So then it feels like a set up instead. (…) That's not what I need now. (…) You want to kind of talk to your loved ones. (…) For me it would have been better if I'd had a colleague (…), that's the kind of person you want to talk to then instead.

The above quote underlines the importance of proceeding from individual needs. However, informants called attention to the fact that subordinates involved in a shocking or upsetting incident do not always know what they need.

Task – Mission Control

This model category describes the leader's attempts to recapture control over the task. The section consists of three sub-categories dealing with mission control:

(1) *Balanced Non-Violent Actions (Hearts & Minds)*

This sub-category is composed of the code 'Non-Violent Actions'. The officers' experience of not being able to affect the IED threat resulted in their making efforts to dissuade the enemy from targeting them. They did this by changing their behaviour and appearance in a series of non-violent actions. For example, individuals applied a more human approach by avoiding carrying heavy arms when talking to the local people. This resulted in a sense of control of the situation and the notion that threats were decreasing even if the reality on the ground was that soldiers became more vulnerable.

(2) *Balanced Handling of Safety – Necessary Risk-Taking*

This is formed by the code 'Too Much Concern for Safety'? A trap some leaders tended to fall into after an incident was to become too controlling and fervent out of concern for the group's safety, or worried they would not be able to handle more incidents. Subordinates interpreted this kind of action as a sign of distrust, leading to decreasing trust in their leader and level of personal motivation, as suggested by the following quote:

> Suddenly he wanted to know [assignment of tasks] so I broached the subject with him on one occasion and told him it felt like he suddenly didn't trust us. (….) Don't you understand how we feel? We've done a good job – there hasn't been a single problem. But the penny didn't drop and he carried on questioning things after that. It was this kind of control over the slightest thing that got a bit wearing.

After incidents, demonstrating presence and guaranteeing the safety of the subordinates were weighed up, often leading to the approach of 'better safe than sorry' and a few days' wait before acting. This decision was probably the one most negatively received by the subordinates, who felt they were prevented from carrying out their task and that the decision conflicted with it – incurring casualties is a risk the leader has to take. One subordinate confronted the indirect leader and described their dialogue:

> He said, "*Well, I actually have responsibility for you*". (…) And then I said, "*I don't buy it because we're all adults. We've come here of our own free will, it's voluntary and everyone's up for it*". "*No, I'm the one they'll blame*" – that's the explanation I got from him there.

The decision to play safe is probably partly a consequence of the indirect leader's not having sufficient resources (for example, armoured cars) to guarantee subordinates' safety. One aspect complicating the decision is the apparent fatalism displayed by individuals. A common statement was "*It won't happen to me*" and even those who had been involved in incidents could maintain their fatalistic attitudes. Such attitudes can prevent subordinates from being realistic about the situation. One indirect leader describes playing safe this way:

> If you break off because something has just happened, then it might be right to stop what you're doing possibly /…/. Is the camp going to be attacked now? Yes, then I have to break off and find out what's happening. But by the next day you're already back out working more actively. It depends on how long you interrupt what you're doing for it to feel like that. Because I think that just when the incident happens that's when you can't say, well, we're going to carry on like nothing's happened. It has to be OK to say, 'What's the situation now?'

(3) *Balanced Handling of Superiors and Media*

This aspect comprises two codes:

(a) Responsibility

The unit commander may not only be the subordinates' scapegoat, but also a victim of the media, making it important for him to feel the support of military headquarters (HQ). Management can provide this support by being well-informed about the situation and by contacting the unit commander when they understand that he is having a hard time.

(b) The Media

When an incident occurred, leaders often chose to manage the media themselves from Afghanistan or have Swedish HQ take care of it. The interview data indicates that it was preferable to deal with the media in the field, since leaders at HQ might not have done it very well. On one occasion, a general made a statement in the media about 'the fortunate outcome' of an incident because the vehicles being used could handle the kind of explosive device that caused it. The informants reported how this statement was interpreted as a safety risk, since this information in the hands of the opposition could lead them to increase the explosive power of future devices.

Discussion

Based on the above findings, a theoretical model of leadership in military operations characterized by the presence of critical incidents (IED attacks) was developed. It follows Grounded Theory guidelines, and rests on an interactional person-by-situation paradigm,[23] which is one of the most solid in psychology.

Another theoretical point of departure of the model is an emphasis on the classical device that the truth lies in the eye of the beholder. This means that it is the way a military leader perceives and appraises what is going on, rather than the objective reality, which governs his or her reactions and behaviours. Based on these two anchors, the core of military leadership after IED attacks could be summarized as consisting of multiple acts of balance, aiming at recapturing control over oneself, the group and the task.

The discussion will centre on these acts of balance, while the model components – 'individual and contextual pre-existing influences' – will be only briefly commented upon as they were not the main focus of the study.

First, we address aspects related to initial appraisal and sense-making. According to the interview data, two questions capture the initial appraisal: "What happened?" and "What do I do now?". Starting with the first question, the attempts of military leaders to understand the situations they suddenly find themselves in is characterized by difficulties in relating the incident to IEDs. This is probably due to lack of experience of this specific threat. To illustrate, many related the sound as coming from a hand grenade rather than from an IED, implying that officers need to be trained for the unexpected and become fully aware of the threats so they psychologically accept them not only as possible but as likely.

Another aspect is related to difficulties in dealing with 'the invisible enemy' and a need to characterize a tangible enemy. Individuals often confused civilians with enemies. This is probably also due to inexperience of irregular warfare contexts, deprived of the obvious and tangible opponent that characterizes regular warfare.

This leads us to the second question, "What do I do now?". Individuals tended to react strongly with feelings of aggression directed at locals in the vicinity. There was an apparent need to fight back. Such feelings, which appear to be common during these kinds of incidents, can be explained by biological anger theories but also by coping theories.[24] Some individuals employ an emotion-focused coping strategy to deal with threats, which implies that they blame others, resulting in feelings of anger, rage, and excitement. This has earlier been identified in contexts characterized by cumulative stress, but the results presented show that it can also occur in acute stressful episodes.[25] It has been observed that the level of stress in soldiers is

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[23] Endler & Magnusson, 1976.

[24] Reyes & Hicklin, 2005.

[25] Michel, 2005.

higher in irregular warfare contexts, which may contribute to individuals reacting more strongly to threats.[26]

Trust is a critical factor in combat[27] and our results indicate that it can have a significant influence on the risk-perception and decision-making of military leaders. A high degree of trust appears to be both functional and dysfunctional, leading to individuals taking unnecessary risks. Regular units often have high levels of trust even before deployment and since leaders in this context are dependent on trust from their subordinates, they might interpret this as utterly favourable.[28] Given the validity of this line of reasoning, it becomes important for leaders of these kinds of units to pay attention to the potentially dark sides of trust. The phenomenon shows similarities to group think.[29]

As stated above, the appraisal part of the model highlights the two questions : "What happened ?" and "What do I do now ?" that were derived from the stories of the informants. Nevertheless, starting from a general theoretical level, this appraisal clearly resembles the primary and secondary cognitive appraisal processes written about by Lazarus.[30] According to his framework, we constantly appraise and reappraise what is going on around us, and in terms of the theoretical model proposed in this study, it means that the appraisal part is not separate from the recapture control part. The graphical division shown in Figure 1 is simply an analytical tool. In reality, the two aspects are naturally intertwined.

We now turn to a discussion of the suggested acts of balance aiming at recapturing control. Beginning with control over self, leaders appear to have considerable difficulties in dealing with their own emotional and cognitive control. However, research has shown that when they do, leaders can have a positive effect on, for example, their subordinates' meaning-making processes and stress management.[31] Our results call attention to the fact that leaders are not unaffected by critical incidents. They often react in the same manner as their subordinates and can have problems serving as positive mediators due to their own stress reactions.

The results from this study suggest that it can be more difficult to recapture control over self if involved in near-incidents. It would seem that individuals involved in this kind of occurrence may react even more strongly than individuals involved in actual incidents. It is important that leaders do not underestimate the significance of these events even if 'nothing really happened'. While individuals involved in actual incidents have an outcome to respond to, those affected by near-incidents are free to make up worst-case scenarios, their imaginations thus provoking strong reactions. An additional explanation may be linked to

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[26] Asnani, Pandey & Tripathi, 2003.
[27] Sweeney, 2010.
[28] Kolditz, 2007.
[29] Janis, 1972.
[30] Lazarus, 1966, 1991, 1999.
[31] Bartone, 2005 ; Campbell, Campbell & Ness, 2008.

stress theory and the fight-or-flight response. The discovered IED is perceived as a threat but the individuals have no tangible opponent or threat to fight or flee from, thus inhibiting biological ways of dealing with stressful situations. A normal way of coping with stressful events is a mixture of emotion-focused or problem-focused coping.[32] When there is no tangible threat, problem-focused coping is prevented since there is no real problem to solve. Problem-focused coping has proven to be more effective than emotion-focused coping, which may possibly explain the strong and prolonged reactions.[33]

Hannah *et al.* argue that leaders in extreme contexts must be able to handle shifts from stable to extreme and back again.[34] Results from this study imply that it is difficult for leaders to maintain or revert to prior behaviours and routines during stable periods. Instead, leaders tend to be occupied with emotions and reactions caused by the critical incident. For example, leaders were occupied with their own feelings of revenge and aggression and did not notice until later that both they and their subordinates were focusing on who and why instead of the task. Another example relates to leaders being too controlling and showing lack of trust in subordinates after critical incidents, presumably due to fear of additional critical incidents.

According to the results, subordinates tend to turn on their leader after critical incidents if they lack trust in him. This is in line with Hurst's findings[35] that subordinates are more likely to scrutinize their leader after critical incidents. Hurst also discovered that subordinates tend to feel more vulnerable and this can be a reason for why subordinates are more sensitive to the leader's changed behaviour and interpret this as a sign of lack of trust in them. This shows that handling shifts can be problematic owing to the strong reactions critical incidents give rise to. As a result of this, we support Lyon's argument[36] that it can be dangerous to put too much onus on leaders to consider the health of subordinates. Nevertheless, since there is greater expectation of leaders to be able to handle extreme situation, it is all the more important to raise their awareness of these issues prior to deployment in order to prepare them. Recognizing possible reactions may help leaders to be more prompt in recapturing control over self.

Hannah, Campbell & Matthews argue that it is important to study how motivation operates in dangerous contexts.[37] Results from this study contribute with a suggestion. After critical incidents, the motivation of various individuals seems to be differently affected depending on their initial motive for joining, and this might by extension affect recapturing of control. For example, self-image-based motives do not seem to be strong enough to be worth risking one's life for (motivation decreases). Lazarus & Folkman point out that anger may be

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[32] Lazarus & Folkman, 1984.

[33] Sharkansky, King, King, Wolfe, Erickson & Stokes, 2000 ; Fairbank, Hansen & Fitterling, 1991.

[34] Hannah, Campbell & Matthews, 2010.

[35] Hurst, 1995.

[36] Lyons, 2007.

[37] Hannah, Campbell & Matthews, 2010.

connected to the goal of protecting self-esteem, and, on the basis of previous discussion about anger and a desire for revenge, one could guess that these individuals also experience higher levels of aggression.[38] If so, individual motives need to be considered during selection. For leaders, it may be important not only to be aware of their own motives but also to identify those of subordinates in order to predict how they both may react to critical incidents.

Moving on to addressing the leader's attempts to recapture control over the group during extremely stressful situations, a general rather than a specific commander's intent can allow for important and necessary individual freedom of action in the field.[39] Under such conditions, it may be more functional to allow for individual initiatives. Nevertheless, our findings show that delegating is not unproblematic for leaders. While they may be aware that delegating tasks is both necessary and more efficient, doing so may induce them to feel inadequate as leaders. As Voogelar points out, it is important to allow both trust and distrust in the relationship between subordinates and leaders.[40] Our findings show that subordinates often do interpret controlling behaviour (or even just participation) from a leader as a sign of distrust in them.

The results highlight that leaders felt inadequate in terms of dealing with their subordinates' stress reactions immediately after a critical incident, since as leaders, their focus and strength needed to be directed at the situation. The most important subordinate-related measures appear to have been taken after the situation calmed down. Leaders obviously felt a great need to support and facilitate their subordinates in times of critical incidents but also found it difficult to find the appropriate way of doing so. It appears that the needs of subordinates tend to be rather basic in nature: the opportunity to rest, eat and talk with closest friends.

Although this study particularly highlights difficulties confronted by leaders, the results also contribute with suggestions for how leaders can successfully recapture control over the group and have a positive effect on subordinates. For example, leaders who confirmed actions after incidents facilitated subordinates' emotional recovery and motivated them to continue and focus on their tasks. Other effective ways of motivating subordinates were to create objectives and make decisions without delay. Allowing subordinates to be involved in decision-making also resulted in increased motivation.

Recapturing control over the task deals with the leaders' efforts to maintain the unit's capacity to continue carrying out their task. An apparent weak point seems to be related to safety issues. Although leaders were aware of the risks in Afghanistan, it became more tangible after involvement in critical incidents. Every action taken was a well-considered decision as regards potential risks. The commanding officers appeared to be the ones who mainly felt personal responsibility and exercised extra cautiousness along with it. This

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[38] Lazarus & Folkman, 1984.

[39] Larsson *et al.*, 2007.

[40] Vogelaar, 2007.

cautiousness caused subordinates to feel anger and disappointment since they felt prohibited from carrying out their tasks. Exposing your subordinates to risks is part of the assignment but given the findings of feelings of vengeance and aggression, it might be functional to delay this. Individuals acting on anger might in worst-case scenarios impulsively threaten, injure, or kill innocents or suspects. Since subordinates' frustration tends to be prolonged, it is important for the leader to communicate and make intentions and purposes visible, to the extent that it is possible.

Finally, several balancing acts were identified. On a general level, the results are in line with the suggestion by Hannah *et al*. that effective leadership in extreme situations requires balancing emotional, cognitive, and physical perspectives of the unit or organization.[41] Failing to do this may lead to unfavourable consequences for the leader as well as their subordinates in terms of lack of trust, decreased motivation, frustration and anger that might get out of hand. Our study contributes with a more detailed presentation of relevant acts of balance which are put into a coherent theoretical framework.

To summarize, serving in an irregular warfare context implies being exposed to invisible enemies. A great challenge for leaders exists in accepting this as an aspect of military operations and keeping themselves and their subordinates focused and motivated without allowing feelings of anger and revenge to take over.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One limitation of the study is the fact that the units were involved in only one IED attack. Repeated incidents can result in individuals becoming more aggressive and increase the risk of negative consequences (e.g., killing locals on the spot).[42] However, this limitation was inevitable since no Swedish soldier had been exposed to several IED attacks. Another limitation concerns retrospective descriptions of the incidents, as all our informants were interviewed after their homecoming. Nevertheless, studies have shown that memories of stressful events can be fairly reliable and that central detail information from traumatic events is often retained better than information from more neutral events.[43] A third concern is that a choice of qualitative methodology with a limited number of informants prevents us from drawing generalizable conclusions. Further work is needed to evaluate the representativeness of the suggested model and the relative importance of its parts.

Future research regarding leadership in an irregular warfare context should continue to examine how leaders can minimize and handle their own and subordinates' stress reactions connected to the absence of a visible enemy. For future study, near-incidents also deserve attention on the basis of results indicating that psychological impact may be great. Additional studies are also needed to develop a more thorough understanding of how what we have

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[41] Hannah *et al.*, 2009.

[42] Zillman, 1983.

[43] Norris & Kaniasty, 1992 ; Christiansson, 1992.

labelled "general pre-existing influences" (individual as well as contextual) affect the appraisal and handling of IED attacks. We also suggest that future research focus on the relation between trust, risk-perception and decision-making. Often, there is an assumption that trust is an entirely positive mechanism ; but in units with a high level of trust, it may have negative consequences. A final suggestion concerns motivation and how different motives for applying for military operations affect how an individual reacts to critical incidents. This might be important to examine from both a selection and a leadership perspective.

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