

# Military Stress and Performance: The Australian Defence Force Experience

George E. Kearney, Mark Creamer, Ric Marshall & Anne Goyne

Reviewed by David Schmidtchen



Of the 52,000 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel who served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1972, approximately 3000 were either killed or wounded in action. In 2002, the Department of Veterans' Affairs recognised one in five of those who had seen service in Vietnam as suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. What does this tell us? First, that psychological injury is the most prevalent form of injury suffered in conflict. Second, that the debilitating effect of operational stress persists beyond the life of the incident or operation. Third, that psychological injury is likely to be the greatest post-conflict personnel cost borne by the ADF and Australian society. Since the Vietnam war a more inquisitive and informed public has watched as the social and emotional costs borne by ADF personnel and their families are revealed.

*Military Stress and Performance* brings the current state of operational stress research and practice to our attention. It provides a comprehensive review of the ADF experience and practice. A range of professional disciplines, which includes psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, social workers and chaplains, is struggling to understand the source, scale and dimension of the problem of stress on operations and its consequences. In Australia, professionals approaching the problem have deliberately adopted a multidisciplinary approach that supports a healthy balance between research and practice. *Military Stress and Performance* reflects this tradition by drawing on a range of professional disciplines to provide an account of the ADF's experience.

The book covers treatment methods, debriefing practices and first-hand accounts and observations. It is structured around four themes: The Stress Phenomenon; Enabling Resilience; Health and Welfare after Deployment; and Caring for Casualties. I was particularly drawn to the personal account of the stresses encountered by a commander at sea given by Lee Cordner. Commodore Cordner moves from his experiences in preparing HMAS Sydney to participate in the 1990–91 Gulf War and the Maritime Interception Force in the North Red Sea through to being 'bemused by all the fuss' on their return home. The value of commanders documenting their experiences of stress in command cannot be emphasised enough.

The contribution of four experienced Australian Army Psychology Corps psychologists on the advances

made in delivering psychological support during the 1990s are revealing. Their reflections bring together the collective experiences of the Psychology Corps and the Defence Force Psychology Organisation to demonstrate how the theory and practice of psychology in operations has evolved. They also provide a clear statement on where practice can be improved. On finishing this contribution, it was clear why the cumulative experiences of the ADF's practical approach to operational stress are in demand from military forces around the world.

Professor Kearney does a commendable job of bringing together the main conclusions of the book. He does so by showing that the problem of operational stress has a long and difficult history that parallels society's struggle to acknowledge, accept and address the problem. In Professor Kearney's words, 'This book contains advice on the best treatment methods; suggestions for the optimal method of debriefing; and accounts of first-hand observations. Highlighted throughout is the conclusion that there is a need for better understanding and more carefully controlled research'. I agree, with the addition that it also shows how far the ADF has come in addressing the problem.

The editors acknowledge the difficulties of structuring the material to allow an easy flow from one section to the next. I believe that this book is best approached as a compendium of stand-alone articles that together contribute a better understanding of a diverse topic. It can be distinguished from other books addressing similar topics by the experience of the authors and the currency of the information. It combines the insights of some of Australia's foremost researchers and practitioners in the field with the experiences of currently serving officers. The book left me with the sense of a work in progress in that we have come a long way but considerable distance remains before we can claim to have solved the problem. I recommend this book to scientists and practitioners working in the area of operation stress. But, I can also see commanders benefiting from a better understanding of how stress on operations affects people, the process of treatment and the factors that influence recovery. ♦

George Kearney, Mark Creamer, Ric Marshall & Anne Goyne (Editors), *Military Stress and Performance: The Australian Defence Force Experience*, Melbourne University Publishing, 2003, paperback, 294pp, RRP \$34.95.