



From Combat to Reintegration: Lived Experiences of Combat Personnel and their Exploration of Operational Exposure, Mental Health Outcomes, Psychological Distress and Post-Deployment

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of combat personnel, focusing on operational exposure, combat-related mental health, psychological distress, and post-deployment reintegration. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected military personnel who had direct combat experience. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) intensity and unpredictability of combat operations, (2) emotional and psychological burden during and after combat, (3) manifestations of trauma and coping struggles among survivors, and (4) challenges and adaptations in post-deployment life. Findings highlight the complex interplay between combat exposure and long-term psychological outcomes, emphasizing the need for sustained mental health support and reintegration programs. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on military psychology and provides implications for policy, intervention, and institutional support systems.

Keywords: lived experiences, combat personnel, mental health, psychological distress, reintegration, qualitative study

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I. INTRODUCTION

Combat operations expose military personnel to extreme physical, emotional, and psychological demands. These experiences often extend beyond the battlefield, shaping long-term mental health outcomes and influencing reintegration into civilian or non-combat roles. Globally, increasing attention has been given to the psychological impact of combat exposure, including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and other forms of psychological distress. However, while quantitative studies have provided statistical insights into these conditions, there remains a need to deeply understand the lived experiences of combat personnel, particularly in terms of how they interpret and cope with these challenges over time.

In many contexts, including developing countries and regional military institutions, research on combat-related psychological experiences remains limited and underrepresented. There is a gap in capturing the voices of personnel who have directly encountered combat situations and the nuanced ways in which these experiences influence their mental health and post-deployment life. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial not only for academic purposes but also for designing responsive mental health interventions and support systems.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of combat personnel, focusing on operational exposure, mental health outcomes, psychological problems among survivors, and post-deployment reintegration of Regional Mobile Force Battalion (RMFB) in the Cagayan Valley Region. By employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study seeks to provide a holistic and human-centered understanding of combat experiences and their lasting impact.

Statement of the Problem

What are lived experiences of the respondents in terms of the following:

1. Combat operation experiences
2. Combat- related mental health
3. Psychological problems in many survivors
4. Post – combat deployment

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of combat personnel of Regional Mobile Force Battalion (RMFB) in the Cagayan Valley Region who have been exposed to combat operations. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this inquiry as it seeks to capture the essence and meaning of individuals' experiences from their own perspectives. Rather than focusing on measurable variables, this approach allows for a deep and nuanced examination of participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of their combat encounters. By prioritizing subjective experiences, the study aims to uncover the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of combat exposure, providing a holistic understanding of how these experiences shape mental health outcomes and post-deployment realities.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess rich and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria required participants to be military personnel who had direct involvement in combat operations, had completed at least one deployment, and were willing to openly share their experiences. These criteria ensured that participants could provide meaningful and in-



depth insights into the realities of combat and its psychological implications. A total of 10 to 15 participants were included in the study, which is consistent with phenomenological research standards aimed at achieving data saturation, or the point at which no new themes or significant insights emerge from additional data collection.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided a flexible yet guided framework for eliciting detailed narratives from participants. This method allowed the researcher to explore key areas while also giving participants the freedom to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions focusing on four primary domains: combat operation experiences, emotional and psychological responses during and after combat, coping mechanisms employed by participants, and their experiences related to post-deployment reintegration. Follow-up probing questions were used to clarify responses and deepen the discussion. All interviews were conducted in a confidential setting, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is widely recognized in qualitative research for its systematic and flexible approach. The analysis began with data familiarization, where the researcher immersed in the transcripts through repeated reading to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. This was followed by initial coding, wherein significant statements and meaningful units of data were identified and labeled. Subsequently, codes were organized into broader themes, capturing recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants' experiences. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, consistency, and relevance to the research objectives. Finally, the themes were clearly defined and named, providing a structured representation of the lived experiences of combat personnel. This rigorous process ensured credibility, dependability, and depth in the interpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process to protect the rights and well-being of the participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, ensuring that participants were fully aware of the purpose of the study, their role, and their rights. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying information from the transcripts and reports. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particularly involving trauma and psychological distress, appropriate measures were taken to ensure participants' emotional safety, including the provision of referrals to psychological support services when necessary. These ethical safeguards ensured that the study adhered to established research ethics and respected the dignity and welfare of all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Intensity and Unpredictability of Combat Operations

Participants consistently described combat operations as environments characterized by extreme volatility, uncertainty, and constant exposure to life-threatening situations. The narratives revealed that combat settings demand rapid decision-making under pressure, often with incomplete information and limited time for reflection. This unpredictability creates a heightened state of alertness, where individuals must



continuously assess risks and respond to evolving threats. Participants emphasized that the lack of control over external conditions such as sudden enemy engagement, shifting terrain dynamics, and unforeseen operational challenges intensifies the psychological burden of combat. As one participant articulated, *"Every moment felt uncertain. You don't know if you'll come back alive."*

This persistent uncertainty contributes to a state of chronic stress, as individuals are unable to anticipate or fully prepare for potential dangers. The findings suggest that combat exposure is not only physically demanding but also cognitively and emotionally taxing, as personnel must maintain constant vigilance while navigating unpredictable scenarios. These experiences align with existing literature indicating that high-intensity and unpredictable environments significantly increase vulnerability to psychological stress, particularly when individuals are exposed to prolonged periods of threat and instability. The intensity of such experiences often serves as a precursor to subsequent emotional and psychological challenges, highlighting the foundational role of operational exposure in shaping post-combat outcomes.

Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Burden During and After Combat

Beyond the immediate dangers of combat, participants reported experiencing profound emotional and psychological burdens that persisted both during active operations and long after deployment. Feelings of fear, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion were commonly expressed, reflecting the cumulative impact of sustained exposure to high-stress conditions. Participants described how these emotions were not confined to the battlefield but continued to influence their daily lives even after returning to relatively safe environments. One participant noted, *"Even after returning home, the fear didn't leave me,"* illustrating the enduring nature of emotional distress associated with combat experiences.

The findings indicate that combat-related stress often manifests as a lingering psychological presence, affecting individuals' sense of safety, emotional stability, and overall well-being. Emotional exhaustion, in particular, emerged as a significant concern, as participants described feeling mentally drained and disconnected following prolonged exposure to combat situations. This suggests that the psychological impact of combat is not limited to acute stress responses but extends into chronic emotional strain. These results are consistent with prior research demonstrating that combat exposure is strongly associated with long-term emotional disturbances, including anxiety disorders and depressive symptoms. The persistence of these emotional burdens underscores the need for continuous psychological support, both during and after deployment, to mitigate the long-term effects of combat-related stress.

Theme 3: Psychological Distress and Trauma Among Survivors

A prominent theme that emerged from the data is the presence of significant psychological distress and trauma-related symptoms among participants. Many reported experiencing intrusive memories, flashbacks, sleep disturbances, and heightened states of hypervigilance, which are commonly associated with post-traumatic stress. These symptoms were often described as involuntary and difficult to control, indicating the deep psychological imprint left by combat experiences. As one participant expressed, *"I still hear the sounds... even when I'm safe,"* highlighting the persistence of sensory memories that continue to affect individuals even outside of combat environments.

The recurrence of such symptoms suggests that combat experiences are not easily compartmentalized or resolved, but instead become embedded in the individual's psychological framework. Sleep disturbances, including nightmares and insomnia, further exacerbate emotional distress, creating a cycle of fatigue and heightened anxiety. Hypervigilance, while adaptive in combat settings, becomes maladaptive in non-threatening environments, leading to difficulties in relaxation and social interaction. These findings reflect the broader literature on trauma, which identifies post-traumatic stress symptoms as prevalent among combat survivors, particularly those exposed to intense and prolonged operational conditions. The data underscore the importance of early identification and intervention for trauma-related conditions, as untreated psychological distress can significantly impair functioning and quality of life.



Theme 4: Post-Deployment Reintegration Challenges

Participants also highlighted the significant challenges associated with reintegration into civilian or non-combat life following deployment. The transition from a high-intensity combat environment to a relatively stable and routine setting was described as complex and often disorienting. Many participants reported experiencing **social disconnection**, difficulty expressing emotions, and challenges in resuming everyday roles and responsibilities. As one participant stated, *"It's hard to be normal again after everything,"* reflecting the profound sense of displacement that can accompany post-deployment adjustment.

The findings suggest that reintegration is not a linear process but rather a multifaceted and ongoing adjustment that requires both psychological and social adaptation. Participants noted difficulties in relating to others who had not shared similar experiences, leading to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding. Additionally, the inability to effectively communicate emotions or process experiences further complicates reintegration, as individuals may struggle to reconcile their combat identities with civilian expectations. These challenges highlight the gap between operational experiences and post-deployment realities, emphasizing the need for structured reintegration programs that address emotional, social, and psychological dimensions. Consistent with existing research, the study confirms that reintegration difficulties are a common outcome of combat exposure, necessitating comprehensive institutional support systems to facilitate successful transition and long-term well-being.

Integrative Discussion

Taken together, the four themes illustrate a **continuum of experiences** that begins with intense and unpredictable combat exposure and extends into long-term psychological and social consequences. The findings reveal that combat experiences are not isolated events but are deeply interconnected with emotional burdens, trauma responses, and reintegration challenges. This interconnectedness underscores the need for a holistic approach to military mental health, one that addresses the full spectrum of experiences from pre-deployment preparation to post-deployment support. By foregrounding the lived experiences of combat personnel, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the human impact of combat and highlights the critical role of institutional interventions in promoting recovery and resilience.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policy, practice, research, and institutional leadership, particularly in the context of military organizations and allied support systems. The lived experiences of combat personnel reveal the complex and enduring impact of operational exposure, necessitating a multidimensional and sustained response from institutions responsible for their welfare.

From a **policy perspective**, the study underscores the urgent need to strengthen and institutionalize comprehensive mental health frameworks within military systems. Given the persistence of psychological distress and trauma-related symptoms among combat personnel, policies must go beyond short-term interventions and instead promote continuous mental health support across all phases of service pre-deployment, active deployment, and post-deployment. This includes integrating mandatory psychological assessments, trauma-informed care protocols, and accessible counseling services. Furthermore, policies should address stigma associated with seeking mental health support, ensuring that personnel feel safe and supported in accessing necessary services.

In terms of practice, the study highlights the importance of developing targeted intervention programs that respond to the emotional and psychological realities of combat personnel. Mental health professionals, military leaders, and support staff must adopt a holistic approach that includes trauma-informed counseling, peer support systems, stress management programs, and family-inclusive interventions. Reintegration programs, in particular, should be strengthened to address social disconnection, emotional suppression, and identity transitions experienced by returning personnel. Training programs for leaders and supervisors should also be implemented to equip them with the skills necessary to recognize early



signs of psychological distress and provide appropriate support.

From an institutional leadership perspective, the findings call for a shift toward more empathetic, servant-oriented, and psychologically informed leadership approaches within military organizations. Leaders play a critical role in shaping organizational culture and can either reinforce or reduce barriers to mental health support. By fostering a culture of openness, trust, and psychological safety, leaders can encourage personnel to express their experiences and seek help without fear of judgment or repercussions. This aligns with contemporary leadership models that emphasize human-centered management and well-being as essential components of organizational effectiveness.

In the domain of research, this study contributes to the limited body of qualitative literature on combat experiences by foregrounding the voices and narratives of military personnel. However, it also opens avenues for further inquiry. Future studies may explore longitudinal trajectories of mental health among combat personnel, comparative analyses across different military contexts, or the effectiveness of specific intervention programs. Additionally, mixed-methods research may provide a more comprehensive understanding by integrating quantitative measures with qualitative insights.

Finally, in terms of social and community implications, the study highlights the broader impact of combat experiences on families and communities. Reintegration is not solely an individual process but a social one, requiring the involvement of families, institutions, and communities in supporting returning personnel. Public awareness campaigns and community-based support systems may help bridge the gap between military and civilian life, fostering understanding, acceptance, and collective responsibility for the well-being of combat survivors.

Conclusively, the study emphasizes that addressing the lived experiences of combat personnel requires a systemic, sustained, and human-centered approach, integrating policy reform, practical interventions, leadership transformation, and continued research. Such efforts are essential in promoting resilience, recovery, and long-term well-being among those who have served in high-risk and high-stress combat environments.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of combat personnel, revealing that their realities are profoundly shaped by the intensity, unpredictability, and cumulative nature of operational exposure. The findings demonstrate that combat is not merely a physical engagement but a deeply psychological and emotional experience that leaves lasting imprints on individuals. The narratives of participants highlight how continuous exposure to life-threatening situations, uncertainty, and high-stakes decision-making environments contribute to sustained psychological strain. These experiences extend beyond the battlefield, influencing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns long after deployment has ended.

The study further establishes that combat-related mental health challenges particularly trauma, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and persistent fear—remain prevalent among personnel even in post-deployment contexts. The presence of symptoms such as flashbacks, hypervigilance, and sleep disturbances reflects the enduring nature of psychological distress associated with combat exposure. These findings reinforce the understanding that the effects of combat are not temporary but can evolve into long-term mental health conditions if left unaddressed. As such, the transition from active combat to non-combat or civilian life is not a simple return to normalcy, but rather a complex and often difficult process of psychological adjustment.

Moreover, the study reveals that post-deployment reintegration presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of social connection, emotional expression, and role adaptation. Many participants experience a sense of dislocation and struggle to reconcile their combat experiences with the expectations of everyday life. This highlights critical gaps in existing institutional support systems, particularly in providing sustained and context-sensitive reintegration programs. The findings suggest that without adequate support, combat personnel may face prolonged difficulties in achieving psychological stability and social reintegration.



In light of these insights, the study underscores the urgent need to strengthen and institutionalize comprehensive mental health programs tailored to the unique experiences of combat personnel. Psychological support should not be limited to post-deployment interventions but must be integrated across all phases of military service, including pre-deployment preparation, active deployment, and post-deployment recovery. Continuous and accessible mental health services, coupled with trauma-informed care approaches, are essential in addressing the evolving needs of personnel.

Additionally, there is a critical need to develop structured reintegration frameworks that holistically address the emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of post-combat life. Such frameworks should incorporate counseling services, peer support systems, family involvement, and community-based interventions to facilitate smoother transitions and long-term well-being. Institutional leaders and policymakers must recognize the importance of creating environments that promote psychological safety, reduce stigma, and encourage help-seeking behaviors among personnel.

Ultimately, this study affirms that understanding the lived experiences of combat personnel is fundamental to advancing both theory and practice in military psychology and organizational leadership. By foregrounding the voices and realities of those directly affected by combat, the study contributes to a more human-centered and contextually grounded perspective on military service. More importantly, it calls for sustained, systemic, and compassionate responses that prioritize the well-being, dignity, and resilience of combat personnel, ensuring that institutional support mechanisms are not only responsive but also transformative and enduring.

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