

The Post Deployment Reintegration of Australian Army Reservists

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

30 June 2014

Abstract

The aim of the present research was to delineate the effects of deployment on Australian Army reservists serving on low-threat overseas stability operations. Even without exposure to traumatic events, reservists face challenges that differ from regular soldiers who prepare, deploy, and return within the constant context of their unit and wider army. More like civilian workers who deploy overseas to assist in disaster and post-conflict zones, Australian Army reservists are coalesced into temporary formations. They then leave the context of their families and civilian employment for the deployment and then return back to their civilian lives, often abruptly

Participants were Army reservists deployed to Timor L'Este for seven months (N=92) in 2002/03, and three consecutive groups (N=350) deployed to the Solomon Islands in 2006/07. The research was broadened to also incorporate the experiences of civilian employers (N=126) and families (N=32) of Army reservists, whose experiences were largely unknown.

The major findings across studies were as follows:

1) Reservists from all study groups returned in sound mental health and settled well.

Measures taken at the end of deployment, six months after return, and two years post deployment found low rates of referrals for follow-up, low scores on mental health screening instruments (K10, PCL-C, DASS-42), and a relatively unchanged pattern of alcohol use (AUDIT).

2) The deployment experience was reported as positive by 65-67%, with the number of positive statements (558) exceeding the number of negative statements (438) by a ratio of 1.30:1.00.

3) Readjustment to civilian life appeared uncomplicated and the reservists continued to be actively engaged with the Army. Their retention in a deployable status was more than twice the level seen among reservists as a whole. They promptly returned to service with their provider units after a substantial absence, despite what would have been the attractions and demands to attend to family, study, and civilian employment activities. Between 12%-25% enlisted in the regulars following their overseas service, and around 12% deployed overseas again within two years of returning.

4) As expected with low-threat military operations, traumatic stressors were only infrequently reported. Nevertheless, the few non-traumatic stressors reported by reservists during their tours were inversely associated with their reported deployment experience and what psychological distress could be detected. The primary source of a less-than-positive deployment experience and slightly elevated psychological distress predominately emanated from work-related sources, for example, the behaviour of others, leadership, and double standards.

5) These associations with non-traumatic stressors were moderated by psychological hardiness. Reservists with higher levels of hardiness nearly always reported a positive experience and negligible psychological distress, while reservists with lower levels of hardiness were more likely to report a less-than-positive deployment experience and low, but appreciable levels of psychological distress.

6) Employers and families reported seeing the benefits of deployment to the growth and satisfaction of their reservist. Both groups reported more positives than negatives when a reservist deploys (1.65:1 and 1.50:1 respectively).

The implications of the present findings are discussed with respect to their application to reservists, employers and families, as well as other occupational groups such as *ad hoc* mission-specific organizations working in conflict and disaster zones.

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Statement of Originality and Consent for University of Adelaide Library

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Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the contribution of the Army reservists who participated in this research. In particular, Rotations 11, 12, and 13 to the Solomon Islands and the 'mighty' Alpha Company, 5/7 Royal Australian Regiment who, along with the four reservists who prepared, however remained in Australia, took a year out of their lives to train for and serve in Timor L'Este in 2002/03. I wish to also register my appreciation to the family members of Rotation 14 to the Solomon Islands, and the many employers of reservists who completed surveys of their experiences overseas on Exercise Boss Lift. Thank you also to those in the military who provided encouragement and moral support over the years.

I also wish to acknowledge my inestimable debt to Professor E. James 'Jim' Kehoe. He has been my supervisor, guide, academic compass, colleague, sensei and friend over the past five years. Without him, many of the ideas, analyses, and academic outcomes would, quite frankly, not have seen the light of day.

Most importantly, I wish to acknowledge Patrick, Kate, Phillip and Mitchell. Thank you for your patience, acceptance, inspiration, and love. Felicity, thank you for your forbearance, and Julie, thank you for your support.

INTRODUCTION

Academic study of the impact of operational service has predominantly focused on the adverse mental health effects of combat operations (Griffith, 2010a, 2011; Hotopf et al., 2006; King, King, Vogt, Knight, & Samper, 2006), particularly Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Adler, Castro, & Britt, 2003; Fear et al., 2010; Ursano, Benedek, & Engel, 2007). The impact of service in lower-intensity operations however, variously denoted as peace-keeping, peace-making, or more generally as stability operations, has received far less attention. Similarly, less importance has been placed on the study of non-traumatic stressors, which also have a significant effect on adjustment during and after operations of any intensity (Bartone & Adler, 1994). These non-traumatic stressors include those inherent to operational deployments, but also include intercurrent life events at home. In fact, the overall impact of stressful life events on symptoms has at least once been observed to be greater than that of combat stress exposure (Bartone, 1999). In addition, the emphasis of research on the adverse effects of stress on some individuals has been accompanied by scant study of the salutogenic effects of military deployment on many other individuals (Antonovsky, 1996; Newby et al., 2005). Protective psychological factors such as psychological hardiness (Kobasa, 1979) may play a part in moderating the potential adverse effects of deployment to stability operations (Dolan & Adler, 2006).

In this context, one rarely-examined group of particular interest are military reservists who have deployed overseas on lower-intensity operations (Riviere, Kendall-Robbins, McGurk, Castro, & Hoge, 2011; Walker, 1992). More so than regular soldiers, reservists are qualitatively similar to civilians who also deploy overseas to assist in disaster and post-conflict zones. Both reservists and civilian workers face similar challenges. Both groups leave their ordinary civilian life, deploy overseas, and then return to their civilian lives, often abruptly (Browne et al., 2007; Lomsky-Feder, Gazit, & Ben-Ari, 2008; Malone et al., 1996; Sareen et al., 2007). Moreover, much like *ad hoc* teams of civilian workers who are often drawn from different aid organisations, the military group with whom Australian Army reservists deploy is not a preexisting unit but a mission-specific

organization. It is comprised of reservists provided by disparate Army reserve units, or provider units, spread across Australia. Thus, the deployed soldiers are compelled to develop familiarity, trust, and cohesion during a relatively brief preparatory training period, and while on deployment, just as civilian teams must do.

The aim of the present research is to delineate the effects of deployment on Australian Army reservists on stability operations and their post-deployment reintegration back in Australia. Moreover, the potential protective effects of psychological hardiness in this context will also be examined. In order to elaborate the background for the empirical studies, the remainder of this introduction is divided into seven sections. The first section will describe the structure of deployment for reservists and its consequences. The second section will describe the stressors inherent in lower-intensity, stability operations, and the third section will focus on the readjustment of reservists to their civilian lives after deployment. The fourth section will examine the personality variable of psychological hardiness (Kobasa, 1979) as a moderator of the impact of deployment stressors on psychological well-being, physical health, and adjustment to civilian life. The fifth and sixth sections will deal with the impact of deployments on the employers and families of reservists, respectively. The final section will provide a commentary and conclusions, followed by the research questions to be addressed in this research.