

ATSS-DAS

MEMORANDUM FOR Commandant, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Access Agreement for Release of Student Writing Assignment Personal Experience Paper ( PEP ).

1. I, MSG Muerer, Craig, submitted a (PEP) to the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives regarding events and experiences that may be of historical significance to the United States Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corps.

2. I understand the manuscript and attached documents will be accessioned into the historical holdings of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives and will belong to the United States Government to be used in any manner deemed in the best interests of the United States Army as determined by the Chief of Military History or his representative. I also understand that I may retain a copy for my own use subject to classification restrictions.

3. I hereby expressly and voluntarily relinquish all rights and interest in the paper to the United States Army with the following caveat/exception:

ALL: Initials

NONE: Initials

4. I understand that the information in this paper may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and therefore, may be releasable to the public contrary to my wishes. I further understand that, within the limits of the law, the United States Army will attempt to honor the restrictions I have requested to be placed on this material.

Date: 2 Dec 10

Student Printed Name: Muerer, Craig

Signature: Craig Muerer

Accepted on behalf of the United States Army by:

SGA Printed Name/Date: Gore, Stanley / 2 Dec 14

Signature: Stanley Gore

C100: Combat Stripes

MSG Craig Muerer

United States Army Sergeant's Major Academy

SGM Gore

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### Abstract

During my deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom as the 1SG of Alpha Company, 15<sup>th</sup> MI Battalion, I saw and experienced various types of combat stress. This stress affected my Soldiers in different ways. Some Soldiers reacted positively and rose to the occasion, while other Soldiers cracked under the pressure. Which Soldiers reacted in which manner might surprise you, I know it sure wasn't what I expected! The combat stripes that my Soldiers earned were both literal and figurative and they lived with those stripes for the rest of their lives.

### Combat Stripes

Traditionally, Soldiers earn combat stripes for wear on their dress uniforms at the rate of one stripe for every six months spent in a combat zone. Soldiers also earn more permanent combat stripes as a result of their experiences in war, but these stripes have nothing to do with their uniforms. These stripes are imprinted on their being, their emotions, their memories, and their hearts. The more permanent stripes are a result of the various stressors that Soldiers experience in combat such as fear, loneliness, anxiety, exhaustion, confusion, and frustration.

My name is Master Sergeant Craig Muerer and in February of 2007, I was assigned as the 1SG of Alpha Company, 15<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Battalion at Fort Hood, Texas. Alpha Company was a unit comprised of Hunter Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, along with all the support equipment and Air Vehicle operators/pilots and maintenance personnel required to support the unit's mission. About six weeks after arriving at the unit and taking over the 1SG position, we packed up and headed to Balad, Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I had 53 Soldiers and 15 contractors from Northrup Grumman assigned to my company. We deployed from April 2007 to June 2008 and had the task of providing Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) support to III Corps. My company provided route reconnaissance, convoy support, support of Special Forces raids, area reconnaissance, and over watch of downed aircraft and Troops in Contact (TIC). The responsibility for the successful execution of these vital missions fell squarely on the shoulders of my Soldiers.

The level of experience in my unit varied greatly. Some Soldiers were experiencing their initial deployment, while other Soldiers were deploying for the third time to Iraq. I counted on my senior leaders and experienced Soldiers to guide and mentor the younger Soldiers through the deployment, helping them cope with the various stresses that they would inevitably encounter.

The initial stressor experienced by my unit occurred as we headed north from Kuwait to Iraq. The “surge” of 2007 was about to begin and an announcement was made that all combat units in theater would be deployed for 15 months as opposed to the 12 months originally scheduled. My Soldiers seemed discouraged by the news and, as the 1SG, I reacted with a smile and assured my Soldiers that we would get through this setback together. It didn’t take me long to realize that the Soldiers of any company will emulate and mirror the attitude of their command team, and that it was our responsibility to lead by example. The Battalion Commander thought that we were a “special unit” and as such, our deployment would not be extended the additional three months from 12 to 15 months. I prepared my Soldiers for the worst and told them that we would be away from our families for 15 months, and that is exactly how things turned out.

The missions were physically and emotionally demanding on my Soldiers. Exhaustion was commonplace as there were many days that the ambient temperature on the runways reached 140 degrees. As daunting as that may sound, my Soldiers would have to wear all their battle gear (helmet, armored vest, and appropriate safety gear) while constantly launching Air Vehicles in support of missions, recovering Air Vehicles that had completed missions, and maintaining and preparing Air Vehicles for follow on missions. Many times, Soldiers were required to stand on the tarmac for hours at a time with no protection from the elements while conducting preflight inspections, waiting to launch the Air Vehicle, and during recovery operations. I had minimal manning, especially as I put Soldiers out on Environmental Morale Leave (EML) for two weeks at a time, and had to run two 12 hour shifts, seven days a week. These missions included mission briefings, about eight to ten hours of actual flight time, recovery of the Air Vehicles, maintenance and debriefing after flights. In addition to mission related tasks, my company was also responsible for Local National guard duty, as well as Entry Control Point guard duty. I tried

to give the Soldiers as much down time as possible, but mission dictated the pace, as our ISR support to III Corps was 24 hours a day, seven days a week. My Soldiers also witnessed some pretty gruesome sights as they provided over watch with the Air Vehicles, such as decapitated corpses in the backs of pickup trucks and people being killed during raids. These psychological factors took their toll on many of the younger, inexperienced operators. The affected Soldiers were listened to, counseled, and sent back to the mission at hand. The images that these Soldiers witnessed will be with them for the rest of their lives.

Another factor that crept into the minds and hearts of my Soldiers was fear for their lives. Even though my company was based at Balad, LSA Anaconda and never left the compound, mortars landing inside the base and even inside our living area were an almost daily occurrence. Fortunately, I only had one incident in which one of my Soldiers was injured. A mortar hit the barracks during the night, exploded through the roof of the building and one of my Soldiers received some minor burns and shrapnel from the explosion. I considered our unit very lucky in that regard. The Soldier that received those injuries is now in the Reserve Officer Training Course and will soon be an outstanding commissioned officer. Thanks to his permanent combat stripes, he knows what it takes to survive and thrive in war. My company was responsible for Local National guard duty. This requirement called for my Soldiers to go in full gear with weapons in amber status to the entry point to the base, pick up the local workers, guard the workers as they performed their duties around the unit area, and return the workers back to the entry point upon completion of their tasks. As the Soldiers suited up for this mission, they voiced to me their fear of having to use the weapons they were loading in case something went wrong. To ease their fear, many times I joined them on this duty and tried to instill in them confidence in their training and their leadership.

Now that we have discussed many of the stress factors that affected Soldiers in my unit, let me turn my attention to the various reactions to that combat stress. The reactions were as varied as the experience levels of the Soldiers. I know that each Soldier will deal with stress in a different way, but the outcome could not have been more different than what I had anticipated!

Let's start with my commander. I looked to him to join forces with me as a united command presence to the company, to inspire and motivate the Soldiers through this long deployment. Though he was a combat experienced pilot and officer, this was his first command deployment. He tried to balance commanding the company seven days a week and as one of the few pilots in command, he was flying RC-12 aircraft four days a week. When you add in command meetings and his flying schedule, he had a difficult time attending to Soldier issues and that resulted in more weight on my shoulders. To add to this problem, he was having marital problems back home, and was devastated upon learning of the three month extension to our deployment. He let the stress of his marital discord and his overloaded schedules negatively affect his daily attitude. He would lash out at Soldiers for no reason, had a negative energy most of the time, and was very distracted from the company mission at hand. After about six months in theater, he approached the Battalion Commander and asked to be relieved and sent home to tend to his marriage. The Battalion Commander obliged, and I was left with a First Lieutenant as an interim commander for about two months. I was amazed to see my counterpart, the most senior officer in the company, crumble under the stress of deployment. That will be a combat stripe he will bear forever! Fortunately, the new commander I received was amazing and revitalized the company and we finished the deployment as the most successful long range Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Company ever in terms of incident free hours flown and number of

High Value Targets (HVTs) captured or killed as a direct result of our intelligence. I attribute all the success to the hard work of my Soldiers.

The next Soldier critically affected was one of my three platoon sergeants. This NCO spent his entire career in Alpha Company, from Private to Sergeant First Class. His deployments spanned nine trips, three times to Iraq and six times to Bosnia. He had two children and a wife that sacrificed greatly over the course of nine years. He came to me one night and literally collapsed under the stress. He sobbed and talked to me for hours about the time he sacrificed with his wife and children. He had medical issues as well, and the stress complicated those even further. He eventually left theater early and went home to reacquaint himself with his family and receive medical treatment. His attitude while in charge of his platoon was awful, and he took his stress out on his Soldiers, so a change was necessary. None of his Soldiers wanted to be anywhere near him. While I respect his service and multiple deployments, he should have spoken up prior to the deployment and not tried to just “get through it”. He owed that to his Soldiers.

My second most experienced platoon sergeant, a Sergeant First Class with 18 years of service crumbled soon after. Once the previous platoon sergeant went home, he came to me with a similar story. He also had medical issues. He did his job as a platoon sergeant, but lacked the leadership and people skills necessary to be effective. His combat stripes consisted of exhaustion, fear, and loneliness. After evaluating his situation, and assessing his medical issues, he was also relieved and sent back to Texas early.

The stress issues were not exclusive to the senior leaders. I also had a Private First Class who joined us later in the deployment due to ongoing medical issues. This was the first deployment for this Soldier had deployed. She could not handle the heat, the physical toll of the

mission, or the confusion factor of being in a foreign country. On her second day in country, she physically collapsed from the heat. After being in theater for about two months, she went to the Combat Stress clinic. They contacted me and told me that she had threatened suicide and that she was required to return to the states within 72 hours. She was diagnosed with psychological issues and has since left the Army.

So far, I have shared only stories of Soldiers within the company ravaged by combat stress. I would like now to focus on events that are more positive. Due to the unexpected departure of two senior platoon sergeants, I had to replace those leaders quickly. I looked within my ranks and chose younger, more energetic leaders. A Staff Sergeant I chose to replace one of the platoon sergeants was amazing. He had about eight years of service and this deployment was his third OIF deployment. He came into the position ready to realign the platoon and refocus them on the mission at hand. His leadership reinvigorated the platoon and they became a cohesive, ambitious, and very combat effective unit. He listened well to guidance and implemented a strategy for unity and effectiveness. He was the glue that held his platoon together through the rough times. This particular Staff sergeant is now a Chief Warrant Officer and is currently serving in Afghanistan. I am very proud of his development and progression!

The next amazing story begins with a sergeant that was in my company. He was 24 years old, had a wife and family back home, and was on his second deployment. This young NCO was my go to guy. He was an expert at the technical aspect of his job, and was very capable tactically as well. He would lead and train Soldiers on a daily basis. Even though he was not in a platoon sergeant position, he operated well above his pay grade. I looked to this sergeant as a shining example of the Army values. Oh, I forgot to mention, this Soldier fell under Stop Loss

and was about 10 months past his scheduled Expiration of Term of Service (ETS), but he didn't let any of that affect his leadership abilities.

Once we returned from our deployment in June of 2008, Soldiers were anxious to move on with their careers. Some went on to schooling, some moved to other units, and others left the service. There was an NCO I had that was amazing at his job, but due to the negative influence he experienced in Iraq, he chose to leave the service and serve the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle community in a civilian capacity. As I have laid out throughout this paper, different Soldiers reacted to their permanent combat stripes in different ways. Many of the responses were positive, but unfortunately there were those that were affected negatively and may never fully recover from their emotional wounds.

I went into the deployment expecting the senior leaders to take charge and lead effectively throughout. The surprise outcome for me was that the leaders I expected to be prepared for this experience completely fell apart and could not be effective in their roles. Many of the younger and more inexperienced Soldiers allowed their leadership to develop and effectively manage both the mission and the Soldiers. This experience has taught me that training for stress in combat is paramount and invaluable. It has also shown me that you can only tell people's sincere traits when they are faced with the most difficult and stressful situations. Remember, you can never judge a book by its cover and the combat stripes you can't see on a Soldier's uniform may tell you the most about them as a Soldier and a person!