



The COVID-19 pandemic and the military: Lessons learned for readiness and resilience

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, organizations throughout the world have been tasked to deal with ambiguity under a global crisis. Many organizations were forced into remote-working arrangements, and individuals had to adapt to the new “normal.” However, private sector organizations were not the only ones affected by this environmental jolt (Spicer, 2020). Military organizations across the globe have been asked to take on unfamiliar tasks while maintaining a state of readiness under fluid and uncertain conditions. For example, military support has been utilized to assist overwhelmed civilian health facilities and personnel (Acacio et al., 2022), transport medical supplies (Kalkman, 2021), and support vaccination efforts (Lopez, 2020) all while protecting the physical and mental health of service members and military families (Segal et al., 2020; Wynn et al., 2020). Overall, the pandemic was a powerful force that impacted the military across various levels, organizational, team, and individual. Aside from the implications at the organizational level, such as operational capacity (Wilén, 2021) and force readiness (Kalkman, 2021), previous research on viruses, such as SARS (Cov-2), has suggested widespread implications on the intermediate levels-of-analysis (i.e., teams), such as team cohesion (Nair & Banerjee, 2021). Additionally, other studies highlight potential individual effects, such as wellness (Maunder et al., 2006), mental health (Han et al., 2020), PTSD (Reger & Rothbaum, 2020), and sexual assault (Leardmann et al., 2013).

This special edition will examine the trials of the pandemic, as experienced by key military stakeholders such as global military units, families, and veterans. In this edition, six articles will detail the efforts to combat the pandemic, the contextual factors that aided or inhibited those efforts, and the performance outcomes across individual, team, and force levels-of-analysis. Perhaps most importantly, the authors share the lessons learned from After Action Reviews of the pandemic, so that key success factors such as resilience and adaptability can be leveraged in future crises. This opening article will briefly discuss the key concepts of the special edition (i.e. resilience, adaptability, after action review), and then introduce the articles and insights of the authors.

It is our hope that these insights are useful for other military stakeholders, and perhaps more importantly, will motivate others to examine their responses to the pandemic.

While military organizations and their respective personnel around the world have answered the call under the strain of COVID-19, an investigation of performance relative to desired outcomes is in order. The events since December 2019 were indeed challenging, but they also offered the opportunity to learn, adapt, and overcome a major trial of military readiness. Before going back into the status quo, the military community will benefit from conducting an after-action-review (AAR) to consolidate lessons learned and prepare for future shocks to the global environment. Further, military personnel and families can provide lessons regarding COVID-19 (e.g., Gribble et al., 2020), such that the military could use these instances to better address future challenges and improve readiness.

Due to the nature of their mission and engaging in often volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments, military organizations have spent considerable resources on building capacity in proficiencies underlying readiness (Moore et al., 1991; Schneider & Martin, 1994), resilience (Meredith et al., 2011), and adaptive leadership (Charrbonnier-Voirin & Rousel, 2012; Cojocar, 2011). The military has been purposefully organized and designed to respond to stress and trauma, such as combat and public relations failures, and thus should be well-positioned to adapt to public crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the organizational structure of the military with its reliance on adaptable and agile leaders is designed to allow the military to be resilient to the unknown shocks of challenging situations. Thus, perhaps some of the competencies developed for overall force readiness can be leveraged in this crisis, but there may also be additional competencies/capabilities that may reveal themselves through closer examination. In the current COVID-19 crisis, military organizations around the world have endeavored to extend their capacities and make advances against the deadly virus. But, in the words of the author Ian Fleming, “Once is happenstance.

Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.” Future crises are inevitable, and the military will again be called on to assist. Military organizations, personnel, and military families can apply these insights gained from the COVID-19 pandemic to future situations in a number of ways. Rather than lose the tremendous learning opportunity, we believe it is time to reflect on the possible lessons learned from successes, challenges, and failures in response to the pandemic, and ultimately leverage the experience of the military to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic stronger, more resilient, and better able to adapt to future tests.

COVID-19 pandemic

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Katella, 2021). This announcement had an immediate and lasting impact on both organizations and individuals throughout the world. Resulting from regulations and restrictions, nearly all organizations entered into crisis mode, and were forced to adapt. In most cases, personnel safety from potentially devastating effects of the COVID-19 virus was the priority. Often, these strategies involved transitioning interaction from a primarily face-to-face environment to a virtual environment and employing digital networking tools such as Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams (e.g., Ratković et al., 2021). Brick-and-mortar organizations (e.g., workplaces, schools, etc.) and their members were forced to embrace this new environment. A recent study found that nearly 70% of workers currently work remotely at least once day a week (Browne, 2018).

However, not all organizations were able to shift to virtual work. While collaboration tools may be useful for some, organizations that work with members of the public do not share this same flexibility. Military organizations required in-person presence for a majority of tasks and roles (e.g., training cadre, combat arms, healthcare, etc.). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these positions and roles within military organizations required and justified dangerous exposure and difficult sacrifices (Jetly et al., 2020).

Given the difficulties that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the military and other organizations must have leaders that are able to identify new and innovative ways to align priorities with the changing environment. In times of crisis, leaders must make decisions quickly that have a profound impact on ethical and moral principles, cultural customs, and civil rights (Dotlich et al., 2009). Fortunately, the military has developed capabilities that can aid in this effort.

Resilience and adaptability

One way that leaders can address challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic is by capitalizing on two strong values within the military: resilience and adaptability (Meredith et al., 2011; Nash et al., 2011). These two terms are commonly associated with turbulent environments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020; Wildman et al., 2021). Resilience is often defined as “positive adjustment under challenging conditions such that the organizations emerge strengthened and more resourceful” (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 3418). Complementary to resilience, adaptability is the capacity to influence resilience (Folke et al., 2010) which can enable organizational change. One of the benefits of adaptability is that it provides organizations a way to deploy their resources effectively by responding to external drivers and stimuli.

Research examining resilience and adaptability goes beyond the individual level of analysis. One such example is an emergent construct referred to as team resilience (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). The concept of team resilience has been defined as “a process by which teams deal with stressors or adversities that are experienced as a collective through dynamic interactions among individual members” (Gucciardi et al., 2018, p. 734). Distinct from team resilience, team adaptability refers to specific modifications to team processes following a specific change (Christian et al., 2017). The outcomes between these two constructs also differ. While team adaptability is often measured via a performance index after a triggering event, team resilience focuses on the performance trajectory over time (Gucciardi et al., 2018). Thus, the military has developed tools to enact resilient and adaptable methods across the broad spectrum of organizational levels – from the individual to the entire force.

Military culture

Military organizations were in a unique position to deal with the uncertainties that came from the COVID-19 pandemic. The inherently high-stress military environment demands members are resilient and well-trained under demanding circumstances. For example, military personnel often are at risk for physical injuries (Hoge et al., 2008) and psychological health concerns (Judkins et al., 2020). Additionally, military service members are often deprived of sleep or have disrupted sleep patterns, which can lead to decreased performance and negative mood states (Good et al., 2020). Specifically, these aspects may influence the military serviceman’s ability to self-regulate, which may have downstream effects on

performance, well-being, and quality of life (e.g., Eliasson et al., 2012). Additionally, military organizations have spent a considerable amount of resources to build readiness (Moore et al., 1991; Schneider & Martin, 1994), resilience (Meredith et al., 2011), and adaptive leadership (Charrbonnier-Voirin & Rousel, 2012; Cojocar, 2011). Therefore, the military has been purposefully organized to respond to crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. One way the military adapts to these situations is through focused learning, and the use of AARs.

After-action reviews

AARs are considered a useful method in providing performance feedback from a collective training exercise (Morrison & Meliza, 1999). Keiser and Arthur (2021) define AAR as “a systematic technique that turns a recent event into a learning opportunity through a combination of task feedback, reflection, and discussion” (p. 1008). A review of cognitive science quickly reveals that individuals provided an opportunity to learn, often fail to do so without reflecting on their experience, and incorporating feedback (Mastiglio et al., 2011). In particular, complex environments provide a number of challenges to experiential learning – the process through which knowledge is derived from and tested through interactions with the environment, relying heavily on reflection and introspection (Kolb, 1984). Learning from experience may be particularly difficult in complex or stressful task-related situations where high performance is expected, demands on cognitive resources are extreme, and feedback is minimal (Day, 2010). These obstacles to complex skill acquisition are magnified when the immediate needs of task completion in volatile and unpredictable environments overshadow the chance to learn and continuously improve (Griffith et al., 2017). AARs provide learners an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills from challenging situations through focused attention and reflection and are very effective in improving task performance ($d = .67$; Keiser & Arthur, 2021). Thus, the AAR process provides an opportunity for military organizations to examine their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to properly prepare for future environmental jolts.

The current issue: The pandemic response

Despite the challenges brought on by the pandemic, we were pleased to accept a number of high-quality articles that move the discussion of the AAR of military responses to the COVID –19 crisis in a meaningful

way. This issue will present six articles that provide insights into the reaction of military organizations, families, and veterans as well as the organizations that support and serve them. The authors in this special edition discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and reactions from six different and unique perspectives: a) the U.S. National Guard (Baker et al.), b) the Irish Defense Forces (Mitchell), c) military families (Gomez et al.), d) veterans (Grzesik & Ghosh; Kay et al.) and e) Italian military volunteers (Tarchi et al.). These authors bring perspectives from Military personnel around the world as they discuss resilience and adaptability, well-being, and behavioral health. We will briefly introduce their contributions in the following section.

Author contributions

Baker et al. examined U.S. National Guard Service Members mental health while on domestic mortuary missions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Guard were faced with limited resources and protocols to handle a humanitarian crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This placed the burden on individual service members to cope with the situation on their own. Exacerbating the issue, the limited interpersonal interaction experienced during the pandemic resulted in limited coping activities otherwise viewed as routine (e.g., building rapport and interacting with others while off duty). As a result, National Guard members exhibited increased PTSD, depression, and anxiety. However, those who engaged in at least one anti-stress activity (e.g., contact with service animals) experienced lower prevalence of these mental health problems. This highlighted an important necessity for having a proactive approach to utilizing resources and providing adequate guidance for those supporting pandemic related missions.

Mitchell examined the efforts of the Irish Defense Force in supporting domestic COVID-19 prevention and relief efforts, as well as the subsequent mental health challenges on military members. The study compared Defense Force personnel deployed to support COVID-19 operations versus Non-COVID-19 deployments in terms of their resilience and mental health. Both samples reported elevated levels of mental health challenges and outcomes, however, there were no significant differences between the samples. Somewhat counterintuitively, soldiers who served in COVID-19 related missions reported higher levels of resilience.

Gomez et al. examined the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Army families in the United States. They assessed how household financial impact,

changes in the work situation due to childcare issues, and family difficulty coping (i.e., self with spouse/partner and/or child) impacted the mental health and well-being of the U.S. Army soldiers. Those soldiers who experienced these challenges were more likely to be screened for probable depression and anxiety. However, Gomez et al. point out some resources that could be better utilized. Army Soldiers and their families did not utilize all the available supportive services related to finance, childcare, and behavioral health. This underutilization may have occurred for a number of reasons; however, one reason may be the need for communication and promotion of available resources. Additionally, Army leaders could have communicated and emphasized the importance of family routines when experiencing disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, this highlights the importance of not only providing support to the Soldier but also providing support to their families.

Grzesik and Ghosh investigated the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reactions for veterans from the U.S. Armed Forces. In their research, they focused on how hope, coping styles, and proactive personality influenced veteran's satisfaction with life. The authors argue that military psychologists should focus on a strengths-based approach for veterans that focuses on positive functioning. Veterans were able to reflect on their previous experiences and coping mechanisms to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, or future global crises. The authors highlight how current military training, development, and communication could proactively engage Active Duty military personnel to drive the development of proactive behaviors that will aid them in their retirement. Proactive behaviors were found to help veterans when dealing with the pandemic; thus, future mental health practitioners and military psychologists could use these approaches when developing material for current Active Duty or enlisted individuals.

Kay, Sutton, Margerison, and McKenna examined the effectiveness of COVID 19 related changes to a well-being support service for military personnel from the United Kingdom. The Multi Activity Course was a 5-day program that provided adaptive sports activities and coaching to recovering military personnel. Due to Covid restrictions imposed by the U.K. government, the program was modified by reducing the number of participants by 66%, conducting all activities with social distancing in mind, and limiting the interactions with the public. Despite these drastic changes to the program, the researchers found improvements to participant's mental well-being were comparable to the original pre-COVID Multi Activity Course.

Finally, Tarchi, Crescenzo and Talamonti conducted research examining how personality factors influenced stress and burnout in Italian military personnel who were deployed for pandemic support assignment. The authors found that in their sample, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were elevated after COVID-related support, and that normal personality factors predicted these higher rates of burnout dimensions.

Conclusion


Taken together, these articles begin to tell the story of the Military's response to a generation-level disruption of societal functioning. Our hope is that lessons can be gleaned from these articles that will benefit other military organizations in their pursuit of readiness, and the safeguarding of their members. However, perhaps more importantly, we hope the contributions of the authors will spur other organizations and researchers to begin their own AAR and use a tragic event as an opportunity to learn, such that responses to similar challenges in the future are met head on, and purposely overcome.

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