Swedish Specialized Boarding Element Members’ Experiences of Naval Hostile Duty

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Swedish naval specialized boarding element participated in Operation Atalanta in 2013 to mitigate piracy by escorting and protecting ships included in the United Nations World Food Program in the Indian Ocean. We describe the experiences of the Swedish naval specialized boarding-element members during 4 months of international naval hostile duty. Some studies have reported experiences of naval duty for the Coast Guard or the merchant fleet; however, we did not find any studies that identified or described experiences of long-time duty onboard ship for the naval armed forces.

Materials and Methods: The respondents wrote individual notes of daily events while onboard. Conventional content analysis was used on the collected data, using an inductive approach. Results: The findings revealed three broad themes: military preparedness, coping with the naval context, and handling physical and mental strain. Different categories emerged indicating that the participants need the ability to adapt to the naval environment and to real situations. Conclusion: The Swedish naval forces should train their specialized element members in coping strategies.

Keywords: Swedish Navy; naval duty; mental strain; coping; qualitative method

Introduction

Working in a hostile environment has negative effects on physical and psychological well-being. For example, in war zones, soldiers are exposed to difficult circumstances, sometimes with tragic and fatal outcomes. Feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and/or meaninglessness increase the psychological pain when a person is exposed to combat. Research has pointed out the harmful effects of stress in a maritime environment, leading to symptoms of, for example, anxiety, sleeping disorders, and inability to relax. Bridger et al. investigated stress among naval personnel and found that lack of integrity and private life onboard caused stress. Research on other occupational groups active in other prehospital environments, such as civilian paramedics, has shown that they are predisposed to develop stress during active duty.

Maritime shipping is a critical part of the world’s transportation infrastructure and is increasingly being attacked by maritime piracy, as demonstrated by many recent news items about pirate attacks against different shipping companies, oil tankers, or private vessels. During 2005–2006, there was a turning point in piracy when international attention increased. In Somalia in 2011, 181 attacks were reported and 28 vessels were hijacked. Some authors concluded that Somali piracy problems were political and that security on ships needs to improve.

For a long time, Sweden had been spared war and terror attacks, but in recent years, the country has been engaged more frequently in different hazardous international missions at sea as well as on the ground. In April 2017, Sweden was exposed to a terror attack when a truck was hijacked in Stockholm; four people were killed and 15 were injured.

During 2013, the Swedish ocean patrol vessel HMS Carlskrona participated in Operation Atalanta as part of a larger global action by a European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) to mitigate and combat acts of piracy in the Indian Ocean as well as protect shipments within the World Food Program and other humanitarian or commercial shipping operations. HMS Carlskrona cooperated with the multinational Combat Task Force 151 of US-led Combined Maritime Forces and the North American Treaty Organization’s antipiracy Operation Ocean Shield. This was the third time that Sweden participated in such action. While patrolling the Somali coast line and the Gulf of Aden, EUNAVFOR warships often visit regional cargo and fishing dhows operating in these waters. These approaches are often friendly and provide EUNAVFOR with the opportunity to reassure local seafarers that Operation Atalanta is at all times on standby to deter piracy activity off the Horn of Africa. Information can then also be gathered about movements of local vessels and possible pirate activity in the area.

The Swedish naval specialized boarding element (hereafter, “boarding element”) onboard HMS Carlskrona was an established, well-prepared team. They worked in a context with enhanced boarding capability, which implied the possibility of boarding at higher threat levels, in darkness or in heavy pitch and roll. They were provided with extra equipment, had been trained in special approaches and techniques to make boarding possible even on uncooperative ships, and they worked closely with helicopters supporting the boarding element. The task for the boarding element was to comply with peaceful enforcement and to follow the rules of engagement (M. Augustinsson, personal communication).

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The ship’s crew and the boarding element were not from the same unit. They were integrated by bringing the entire crew together under the same commanding officer. The vessel’s small size had a positive effect on the integration because it allowed a large group of people with mutual and few tasks to coexist onboard (O. Stark, personal communication).

The chief psychologist of the Swedish Armed Forces has emphasized the importance of lessons learned from previous international operations. For example, it is desirable to plan and implement effective training that can mentally prepare individuals to take part in international operations. Pollack also pointed out the importance of psychological care of individuals. In a systematic review of peace-keeping deployments, Sareen et al concluded that most peace keepers do not develop high levels of distress. Positive appraisal or sense of meaningfulness of a mission was associated with lower levels of distress. Soldiers assigned to international duty need to be prepared for all possible events that the duty may involve.

Eriksson developed a model for producing readiness, using the taxonomy of Blooms (cognitive area) and Kratwohls (affect area) and adding a professional axis, whereby people are forced to take a stand on important questions for particular professions and then develop a system of values of their own, which result in a higher level of readiness. Eriksson implies that the cognitive area is the “drill,” which involves doing different kinds of exercises and training over and over again, and the affect area is “how you can create new knowledge.” Together, this creates an apprehension of the environment that presents a truthful picture of the world and increases one’s readiness. Knowledge is created by going through new things one has not been in contact with before.

Schraagen and Post found that a team’s level of readiness depends on experience. Compared with less experienced naval teams, more experienced naval teams are characterized by a larger proportion of information shared, increased team participation, and the team coordinator playing a more central role.

Research on naval personnel has identified that strain is not a random occurrence, because important, individual, psychosocial risk factors for acute strain were found. A few studies have reported experiences of naval duty with the Coast Guard or merchant fleet, but we did not find any study that identified or described experiences of long-time duty onboard ship with the naval armed forces.

Other research on isolated working environments (e.g., studies from space stations, oil rigs or polar stations) has found that employees live with high anxiety, and family support is limited. Certain personalities cope well in such extreme environments, such as people with low neuroticism, low aggressiveness, or high levels of extraversion. According to Folkman, coping refers to “cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by a stressful event.” Thus far, 400 different ways of coping have been identified.

The aim of the present study was to describe experiences of the Swedish naval specialized boarding element members onboard a ship during long-term international naval hostile duty.

Materials and Methods

Respondents were recruited by the first author after contact with the boarding element’s captain. He agreed to participate in the study with his crew while serving onboard HMS Carlshrona during a 4-month assignment. The commander of the ship also gave his consent for the study to be carried out during Operation Ocean Shield. The respondents consisted of 11 men aged 23 to 39 years (mean age, 26 years). They were an accessible and homogeneous group, healthy, and well trained, with a high probability of completing the study. According to Patton, homogeneous sampling reduces variation and simplifies the analysis.

The respondents wrote individual notes of events over 1 week on three different occasions: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of their duty overseas. All notes were stored in a safety locker by the medical director onboard when each writing period ended. When all three test periods were completed, the notes were checked by the security officer to ensure that no classified information was divulged. All the notes passed the security check without deletions, and nothing in the texts was left out.

Swedish Specialized Boarding Element.
Photograph by Magnus Augustinsson/Swedish Armed Forces.
First, all data were read several times to get a sense of the whole. Data were read word by word and specific words from the text that seemed to capture key thoughts were highlighted. Various statements from the participants about the different influences onboard the ship were identified. Then, notes on initial thoughts from the data were made and, at this stage, preliminary labels of codes became apparent. Coding was used as a bridge to fill the gap between the text and the reader. Codes were then organized in different categories before further data analysis was done. The categories were used to group codes into clusters. The last step of the analysis was to develop definitions for each code, category, and cluster, which was done by discussions within the research group. To report the findings, examples from each category and code were identified from the data.

In this study, the research question “what are the experiences from the Swedish naval special operations team members onboard a ship during long-term international naval hostile duty” was answered. Krippendorf stated that “the research question of content analysis must be answered through inferences drawn from the text.”28 On completion, the report was checked for accuracy and support for the findings was expressed.

Ethical Considerations
The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Linköping (Dnr 2013/163-31). The respondents were asked orally and in writing to participate in the study. They were informed that being a participant in the study was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation and without influence of their current duty, naval mission, or training. All respondents agreed to participate and gave written informed consent.

Results
The findings were organized into three broad categories: military preparedness, how to cope with the naval context, and ability to handle physical and mental strain. Military preparedness entailed the participants reaching their affective and cognitive goals by being capable of activity-based approaches and of performing, as well as being prepared in the naval environment. That meant having knowledge of different threat levels, acquiring combat skills in a naval context, relying on their equipment and their preparations, as well as having knowledge about the ship, the equipment, and the operations. This category refers to operational preparations and equipment being in order. Combat drills onboard were frequent in the beginning but became less common as time went by. Keeping the equipment in order seemed to be important during all test periods.

The category “how to cope with the naval context” was about feelings of solidarity, as well as being mentally focused by being able to cope with the naval environment, the sense of belonging, and social acceptance. How to deal with the drudgery onboard was about, for example, trying to find meaningfulness, satisfying basic needs, being part of a greater whole, retaining one’s ability to act, being tired, experiencing fatigue, and bad recovery. This category highlighted that despite rough seas, the participants needed to work. For example, the bad weather conditions affected their sleep.

Ability to act in different naval hostile operations and environments required physical preparations. All the respondents took part in physical training almost every day in the gym; they ran or performed other fitness training during the long-term operation. The notes revealed that the participants took part in a number of other activities during the 4-month duty overseas. Some of the activities were connected to daily routines (e.g., cleaning, meetings, administration, eating) and others dealt with the everyday life onboard (e.g., watching movies, either alone in the cabin or with others; playing cards, Monopoly, or television games; listening to music or singing; reading; or studying).

Bad Weather, Heavy Pitch and Roll, Trouble Sleeping
The category “ability to handle physical and mental strain” was about acting professionally and being able to master different situations by finding a balance between action and nonaction, as well as ability to master readiness for action. That dealt with how to cope with waiting for action, handling exposed positions, contingency planning, preparing for battle, actions accomplished, and also physical and mental strain.

Many of the individual notes of events dealt with strain and the effect that constant changes in the state of alertness had on the respondents. The effect was described as “being extremely tired” or feelings of “physical and mental strain.” Other experiences of strain were described when the participants used the rigid-hull inflatable boat and expressed feelings of being “soggy and cold.” The participants also had to handle calm days onboard the ship, with nothing to do except have meetings, drink coffee, sunbathe, or study. They also had to manage being aroused in the middle of the night to operate at the highest state of alertness and at the highest threat level. Even at night, the heat was evident, and both physical and psychological stress were obvious. One person’s note read “Awakened because of an operation at sea, fixed the equipment, began the operation: threat level 7/10, stress from the heat 7/10, physical stress 7/10, psychological stress 3/10, hard physical work when operation took place inside the ship.” Seven hours later, the same person wrote: “Accomplished an operation. Stress from the heat 5/10. Good control of the situation.”

Discussion
The results revealed that the participants experienced different effects of being on the ship for 4 months overseas, which is a common time frame for naval operations.13 Participants reported different ways of overcoming the isolated environment of the ship, such as watching movies, playing cards, or reading. Even meal times seemed to be a welcome break in the daily routine on the ship, with the sense of belonging and being among friends. Bryan and Heron10 found that a sense of belonging may protect against the risk for depression during all stages of deployment for servicemembers. The participants undertook fitness training almost every day during the operation. Research has shown that physical fitness can actually increase military stress.11 This was confirmed in a study in which cortisol levels increased with physical workload. Soldiers carried stretchers with and without shoulder straps, and the levels of cortisol increased when the straps were not used.12 However, this study shows that mental stress can be handled through fitness training.

Being in an unknown naval context means not being able to find one’s way onboard the ship, leading to many walks and
Operation preparedness was partly done onboard the vessel (e.g., by fire drills or battle drills), which helped participants to feel safe and be prepared to act, even the dark.

In the period before overseas duty, this model of readiness may be integrated in knowledge of different theoretical subjects to help prepare boarding element members in a better way. This is in line with other studies that indicated the need for strategies to better prepare, identify, and treat those who are exposed to stressors during deployment, in war-like and in peace-keeping operations.33

Being assigned for international hostile duty means being prepared for all possible events the duty may involve. The tasks for HMS Carlskrona were partly to deter and disrupt piracy in the Gulf of Aden. For the participants to act and do what they had been trained for was demonstrated by the personnel knowing how to handle their military profession, but being prepared for the nonaction or the drudgery onboard the ship was more difficult.

Different categories emerged in the results, indicating that the participants must be able to adapt to the naval environment and to real situations. They need to be well prepared to act, if necessary. Choosing a crew for different kinds of duty at sea involves a selection process and perhaps this has to be done in a way that the naval environment is tested by the crew before participation. This seems to be important; Bandahur10 stated that, most likely, piracy will be increasingly well organized and more violent in the future. The question of how the boarding element members can be better prepared before participating in national or international duty at sea still remains.

Experiences of everyday life onboard ship can be described as the ability to cope with various situations, sometimes with the risks to one’s life. Using coping strategies, individually or in a group, can be one way of dealing with the naval context during long-term duty. This research recommends that opportunities for coping (e.g., by making studying possible) should be created for the armed forces as well as the merchant fleet while on long-term operations.

Conclusion
Experiences of everyday life onboard ship can be described as the ability to cope with various situations, sometimes with the risks to one’s life. Using coping strategies, individually or in a group, can be one way of dealing with the naval context during long-term duty. This research recommends that opportunities for coping (e.g., by making studying possible) should be created for the armed forces as well as the merchant fleet while on long-term operations.

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Author Contributions
MH and AJ designed the study and performed the literature search. MH performed the data collection. MH and AJ did the data analysis. MH wrote the initial draft. All authors contributed to data interpretation and critical revision of the manuscript. MH and AJ wrote the final draft with support from LL. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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