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Suicide prevention in veterans from peace-keeping

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For more than 50 years Norway has taken part in international military peace-keeping missions. During recent years, increased attention has been given to the stressors inherent in peace-keeping, and to the possible negative long-term health effects for the personnel involved. Exposure to danger and grotesque impressions during the service period may result in an increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder in the veterans. We will discuss the risk of suicide in veterans from peace-keeping operations, and present the existing suicide prevention measures for the Norwegian Armed Forces' international operations.

Each year approximately 1 500 Norwegian men and women serve in these forces. The vast majority of these soldiers (90-95%) are reservists. Most are granted a leave of absence from their place of work or school to serve for six months, a year or more. Currently there are more than 30 000 veterans in Norway who have served with the UN or NATO.

Norway and other countries have recently been looking more closely into the stress and strain UN soldiers are subjected to. Questions have been raised concerning the consequences such stress may have on the mental health of the soldiers in a long-term perspective. Some studies have found an increased risk of suicide and accidents among war veterans (Hendin & Polliger Haas, 1991; Eitinger & Strøm, 1973). Impulsive risk behaviour as a reaction to war trauma was already described as a clinical phenomenon after World War I (Herman, 1992), and an increased risk of suicide has been found among Vietnam veterans with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (Bullman & Kang, 1994).

Service in the UN forces brings with it other types of challenges and strains than traditional war. A UN soldier is not fighting an enemy. The aim of the UN forces is to adopt a neutral stance, acting as a buffer between enemies, and their military tasks primarily concern observing and reporting, keeping guard and mediating. During his service, the UN soldier may be subjected to military humiliation or verbal harassment, or the warring parties may test his limits, taunting him and putting on a show of strength. He may also be placed in dangerous situations, or be a witness of abuse or violence against civilians without being allowed to react. A UN soldier is expected to control his or her aggressive impulses and escape mechanisms when threatened. Frequently the conduct expected of a UN soldier is quite different and much more restrained than what a soldier learns in boot camp. The reactions this may give rise to in individuals have been designated the UN-soldier syndrome (Weisæth, 1990).

A number of studies have shown an increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans of UN operations (Aarhaug et al. 1993; Litz et al. 1997; Ward, 1997; Mehlum & Weisæth, 1998; Bache & Hommelgaard, 1994; Stuart & Halverson, 1997). On the other hand, there have been few studies that have examined mortality among veterans after their years in service. Among American soldiers after the Gulf War an

increased mortality rate due to accidents was found, but not due to natural causes (Campion, 1996). An increased risk of involvement in accidents was found among Swedish UN veterans who had been subjected to direct acts of war (Kettner, 1972). A large study of the experiences of UN personnel has been undertaken in Norway, in addition to an analysis of mortality (Aarhaug et al. 1993).

Experiences and reactions among UN veterans

The UNIFIL study (Aarhaug et al. 1993) showed that the majority of those who had served in Lebanon considered their UN duties as a positive and instructive experience. Most felt that their UN service had improved their stress tolerance level and increased their understanding of the Middle East conflict. At the same time, a large proportion of the personnel had been involved in dramatic events such as being held at gunpoint, being taken hostage, witnessing violence against the civil population, or had been in other difficult or dangerous situations. Some of the respondents reported post-traumatic stress reactions, such as nervousness, sleeping disorders, nightmares, feelings of guilt and reliving events from their service period.

Mortality among Norwegian UN veterans

The UNIFIL study examined mortality in the years after the service period. From 1978 to 1991, 15 931 Norwegians served in UNIFIL in Lebanon. Table 1 shows the mortality rate for this group during this period (observed mortality), distributed as natural deaths, suicides and other violent deaths (ICD 8 and 9). The expected number of deaths is calculated on the basis of mortality in the Norwegian population, controlled for the number of persons, age, gender and period of time (Aarhaug et al. 1993).

Table 1: Death from various causes for personnel who served in UNIFIL during the period 1978-1991. Observed and expected deaths.

Cause of death	Observed deaths	Expected deaths
Natural deaths	68	113
Suicides	45	32
Other violent deaths	59	45
Total	172	190

A total of 172 deaths were observed, which is lower than expected. The number of natural deaths is lower than expected, quite probably due to the fact that UN personnel have been selected on the basis of good physical health. However, the number of suicides and other violent deaths is higher than expected. These findings may suggest a potential relationship between participation in international military operations and increased mortality through accidents and suicide. These findings have helped to put a

autopsy study has been initiated, which will explore the possible relationships between participation in international peacekeeping operations and processes that might lead to death by suicide or accident. We hope that the findings from this study will contribute to increased effectiveness in the prevention strategies in the Norwegian Armed Forces.

The Stress Mastering Team cooperates with the assistance services and may be contacted for literature, information or advice concerning clients with experience from UN or NATO service. If you wish to read more about UN or NATO service, please check the following Internet address: <http://www.mil.no/fn-nato>.

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