
Fragging and Suicides - Not Merely Stress: Systemic Changes are Essential

Vijay Oberoi

Fragging or targeting one's comrades on account of stress and harsh environmental conditions has been in the news lately. According to media reports, there have been at least 23 cases of military personnel losing their lives during 2006 because of fragging — a very high number indeed. An officer of the rank of major was killed only two months back in yet another case of fragging.

A related issue is the rising number of suicide cases in the army, the reasons for some of which are similar to those related to fragging. The number of suicide cases rose to 136 during 2006 and 58 cases have occurred so far during 2007. Cumulatively, from January 2004 to August 2007, as many as 450 suicide cases have been reported in the defence forces. Of these, the highest number, 380, is from the army. While the bulk of suicide cases are as a result of personal reasons, not related to service in the defence forces, some of them can be attributed to the same reasons that lead to fragging. No professional force can afford to lose its personnel in this manner, least of all the Indian Army, which is a force which cares for its soldiers and officers.

Many reasons have been advanced for these incidents, from lack of adequate leave to insufficient psychological oversight. Both the issues have also been probed and analysed by the Service Headquarters as well as others and as reported in the media, remedial measures have been instituted. These range from sensitising commanders at all levels, particularly at the unit level; appointing psychological counsellors; augmenting psychiatric centres in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the northeastern states; liberalising leave; yoga training; opening clogged communication channels; and exercising

Lieutenant General **Vijay Oberoi** (Retd.) is a former Vice Chief of Army Staff (VCOAS).

better command and control. According to one report, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence has suggested that if jawans commit suicides, officers should be blamed. Another report states that an expert panel set up by the Ministry of Defence has stated that abusive language and perceived humiliation by superiors were among the factors leading to suicides.

All the above, in my view, are peripheral measures, which could well be termed tactical solutions. The environment in which the bulk of the army is operating, needs to be taken into account if we are looking for long-term and lasting solutions. We must not lose sight of some fundamental issues, which I believe are the real reasons for this state of affairs.

Jawans of the Indian Army do not get rattled easily. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the main ones are three. Firstly, a large number come from families and clans which have traditionally chosen the army as a career. They, therefore, understand the rigours of army life much better than their counterparts. Secondly, the long stints of recruit training and continuing training thereafter in their units, enhance their physical and mental faculties. Thirdly, man-management is a creed amongst the leadership of the army, particularly that from the combat arms. The bonding it creates does not get undone easily. Man-management implies close comradely relations between the leaders and the led, wherein both look to each other for support. The army has excellent systems, time-tested and skillfully honed, which ensure a high level of trust and camaraderie between the officers and men. Another facet of man-management is efficient internal administration in a unit.

Counter-insurgency (CI) and counter-terrorist (CT) operations, in which the Indian Army finds itself embroiled for nearly half a century, are extremely difficult for soldiers. The level of difficulty increases with the intensity of operations. As an example, while the intensity is usually low in the northeast, most operations in J&K are highly intense and have been so for the last 16 years. A soldier is trained to fight an enemy that is not only identifiable but known to be located in a fairly well defined geographical area. Although surprise and deception are employed by both sides in war, there is a certain amount of predictability in the actions and reactions of the opposing sides. This environment is unfortunately not available

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in CI/CT operations, where there is a large number of restraints and constraints on the soldiers conducting such operations.

By their very nature and on account of the *modus operandi* of the insurgents and terrorists to merge with the local populace, CI / CT operations are conducted in close proximity to, and sometimes in the midst of, the local population. In such situations, there is always a grave danger of becoming a target of the insurgents' fire, who, unlike the soldiers, are not at all bothered by collateral damage, or killing and maiming innocent bystanders. The soldier is, therefore, perpetually on edge during such operations. When this continues on a 24X7 basis over prolonged periods, even the traditional strength of our soldiers wears out.

In the above milieu, if worries on the home front and an unresponsive civil administration are added, a soldier sometimes breaks down. Such a breakdown can take many forms, like increased alcohol intake, becoming a loner, disobeying orders and even increased risk-taking, as if 'life' had suddenly become unimportant. In such a frame of mind, even mild slights assume a disproportionate size and when a soldier reaches the end of his tether, he forgets himself completely and attacks his comrades and superiors, resulting in fragging. Those who are more inward looking may resort to suicide instead.

So, where does the remedy lie? Many measures have been suggested, from inducting hundred of psychiatrists, to meditation, Vipasana and Yoga classes, to an in-depth study by the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR), and so on. I am sure all these will help, but this would be skirting the main issues, which I want to dwell on in the next few paragraphs.

No army can carry out sustained, day in day out CI and CT operations of the intensity which is a norm in J&K, for prolonged periods, without these affecting the psyche of the soldiers as well as their units. The army has been conducting mid to high intensity CI and CT operations in J&K for over 16 years now. Most infantry units and individuals have had a number of tenures, each of two to three years, in this environment during this period. The senior leadership of the army has time and again cautioned the political leadership that such prolonged employment is counter-productive and needs to end. I think the political leadership understands the negative implications, but has no alternate instruments, which can be employed, and the army de-inducted. The Central Police Organisations (CPOs), which have been raised specifically for such tasks are neither well trained or well led, nor made available for these tasks in adequate numbers. Numerous suggestions for upgrading the efficiency and professionalism of the CPOs have met with political ambivalence, bureaucratic stubbornness and turf protection. The result is that the army's commitments on

such tasks keep increasing, not just in J&K but also in the northeastern states. I daresay, the army will be asked to take on even more such commitments in future. This is not just a fragging issue. It has much wider repercussions relating to the fitness of the army for its primary role.

Along with the regular combat units of the army, a large number of Rashtriya Rifles (RR) units are also operating in CI/CT roles. Although the RR has done a commendable job, there are certain inherent deficiencies in it. The most obvious is lack of cohesion, as personnel do not 'belong' to their units, as in other combat units like infantry battalions. They come to RR battalions on a tenure basis and, hence, do not have the kind of commitment soldiers have to their own regiments and units. I had sought to eliminate this lacuna in 2001, by restructuring the RR battalions and making them akin to infantry battalions, affiliated permanently to infantry regiments. However, as soon as I disappeared from the scene, 'turf' again raised its ugly head and the army continued with the earlier arrangement. While one appreciates the desire of other arms and corps to increase their strength and send personnel to the RR, we are missing out on the cohesion which the regimental system brings and which has always been the strength of the Indian Army.

The Indian Army has always recognised the role the commanding officer (CO) plays in all aspects of an efficient unit. The truism "good CO-good unit" is apt, time-tested and even more important in a CI / CT environment. The army selects its COs with great care, but perhaps on account of the huge shortage of officers, nearly 30 per cent, the kitty from which the selections are made is not large enough. In RR units, some non-infantry COs are also posted. They are good officers, but perhaps they are not fully conversant with the infantry ethos. There is also an increasing tendency to overload the CO with too many tasks and instead of giving him a free hand, many senior officers tend to interfere in his command.

The second truism, which needs highlighting, is "good officers-good units". There have been many instances of a unit carrying an indifferent CO, because of its regimental ethos and good officers. However, on account of the huge shortages of officers, which manifests only in units and not in higher headquarters, the few available officers in our combat units are over-burdened. Most units have only around 50 per cent of their officer strength posted, but at

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any one time, the numbers present can be counted on the fingers of one hand, the others being away on training courses, leave and other duties. When Col Vasanth, CO of 9 MARATHA LI laid down his life fighting infiltrators on the Line of Control in J & K in July 2007, many of us had wondered why the CO had to join such a fight. Besides his obvious bravery, the fact of the matter is that there were no officers available and, hence, the CO had to join in the fire fight himself.

In this respect too, many proposals have been made to the political leadership about reducing, if not eliminating, this chronic shortage of officers, but again bureaucratisation and turf have consigned them to the obscure cupboards of the bureaucrats. It is to the credit of the dwindling number of officers of the combat arms that despite these systemic disabilities, they are performing so well.

The next aspect I wish to dwell on is *izzat*, which is perhaps the highest motivation for a soldier. Sadly, the bureaucracy has spared no effort to downgrade the standing of the defence forces. This is manifested in all the dealings of the bureaucracy, who fail to realise that unless there is a supportive and concerned civil administration to look after the families, property problems and concerns of a soldier, he will remain a troubled person. Unfortunately, the political leadership has compounded the problem by the lack of any firm policy in this regard. In fact, they need to be chastised for ignoring the soldiers' *izzat*; perhaps they are not completely sensitised to this aspect or they feel it is a minor issue, which in any case has no effect on their so-called vote-banks!

Besides the three systemic causes I have outlined above, there are many other issues of importance, like shorter tenures in CI / CT environments, better equipment and weapons, reducing the number of restrictions on the army, reducing pressure to deliver, efficient internal administration, adequate monetary compensation, frequent leave, adequate rest and recreation, and other hygiene factors, as the management gurus call them. Space does not permit me to elaborate on them, but I am sure they are well understood.

Let me conclude by saying that while the army focusses on the non-systemic issues and improves the environment in its combat units, the government must take up the systemic issues, with urgency. The aim must be to eliminate such cases altogether and not just reduce them. At the same time, there is an urgent need to place the army and indeed the defence forces at levels which restore their *izzat* and honour.

Soldiers join the army to fight for their country and kill the country's enemies. They have no desire to kill their comrades. Let us not make them do so, by a callous approach and by not ameliorating their concerns. Pious platitudes are no substitute for substantive action.