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Boots on the Ground: A First-Hand Account of Conducting Psychological Research in Combat

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with Capt. Paul B. Lester

At the height of the surge in Iraq, Captain Paul Lester, an Army research psychologist, embedded himself with the 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment in order to study leadership and psychological resilience in combat. Few researchers are ever presented with the opportunities and responsibilities inherent for a psychologist in this situation or with the decisions he faced when agreeing to take on this mission. In his own words, Captain Lester explains the nature of this mission, what makes research in this context so unique, and what lessons he learned.

Peter Harms is an assistant professor in the Department of Management at the University of Nebraska and a program evaluator for the U.S. Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program.

PH: Could you explain a little about what you do in the Army?

PL: Army research psychologists are tasked with using sound, scientific methods to answer questions put forward by the Army senior leadership. More than anything else, our job is to use research to inform policy and help soldiers. There are about 25 uniformed research psychologists currently working for the Army right now. Most research psychologists are active-duty officers and the rest are civilians who

work with us full time or as contractors. Most of these individuals have training in clinical psychology, industrial-organizational psychology, or neuroscience.

PH: You personally experienced collecting data in a combat setting. Could you briefly explain exactly what you did, the nature of the context that you were collecting data in, and the goals of your research?

PL: Over the course of my studies at the University of Nebraska it became apparent that while we know about leadership, we actually know almost nothing empirically about leadership in a combat environment. What we do know was written by SLA Marshall in *Men Against Fire*, a very controversial piece of research that was done in World War II.

When I joined the faculty at West Point my officemate was a gentleman named Major Michael Shrout. Together we hatched a plan to study leadership in combat. When he later took command of 2-6 Infantry located at Baumholder, Germany, we began a 2-year longitudinal study of this particular battalion. I collected data from them on a number of occasions: when they were still in gunnery training in Germany, then again about 30 days before they were going to deploy to Iraq, and again several months later in Salman Pak, Iraq. I ate with them, lived with them, and went on patrols with them as a member of their unit for about 6 weeks. When they returned from combat I met up with them again for a fourth wave of data collection.

The goal of the research was to see if the nature of leadership changed from when you were in garrison, when nobody was shooting at you, when your life was not at risk, versus leadership when your life was at risk every single minute of the day. I also wanted to look at, broadly speaking, whether going to combat is a developmental intervention in itself. It is a contextual intervention that an entire organization is dropped into. I wanted to see how leaders developed by being in that very rich context and putting their lives and the lives of their soldiers at risk every day.

PH: You embedded yourself with the organization. Were there ever any cases where you were under fire yourself, going through the same experiences as the participants?

PL: No, not under fire. When you go to Iraq, and to a lesser degree in Afghanistan, soldiers primarily operate out of bases, which are relatively safe. They're walled off, there's barbed wire, and there are people guarding them. You're always subject to mortar fire and rocket fire and things like that, but it's relatively safe. But it's when you go outside the wire, that's when you put your life at significant risk. You're riding around in vehicles that are targets for improvised explosive devices, and

you're a target for snipers. I decided very early on that I could not study leadership in a combat environment by sitting in the outpost and watching these guys go out on patrol and come back and then asking them "What was that like?" I needed to embed myself; much like a reporter would, and go out on patrol with them in order to understand the context. Keep in mind that before I was a psychologist I spent 11 years as an infantry officer, and I had trained my entire career to do the things that they were doing. But I needed to see it firsthand in order to understand for myself the fears and the concerns that people go through.

I recall one time when I was with an 18-year-old private; he had just joined the unit and this was probably his 50th or 60th patrol that we were going out on. It was my third while I was there. And we climb into the back of an MRAP, and this kid looks at me and says, "Well sir, if it's my day, it's my day." If it's my day to die, it's my day to die. That type of fatalism is probably unique to the combat environment. Soldiers know that they can rely on their training, but in the end if it's their day to die, then it's their day to die. And to hear somebody say that and really mean it, it's something that you never really forget. I was very fortunate to actually experience that. It helped shape my views of the research project that I was doing.

PH: What kind of sacrifices did you have to make in order to conduct this research?

PL: Even before the leadership in combat study, one of the major sacrifices was that Army regulations required that I take a voluntary demotion from major to captain in order to transfer from the infantry to the Army Medical Corps. This transfer was necessary in order to become a full-time research psychologist. Not only was this a financial hardship but it also meant that I have spent over a decade as a captain. Ordinarily, people who serve as captains are promoted in about half that time.

Going into the field of combat in order to conduct research was a different kind of hardship. It required me to be away from my loved ones and a job that I loved for several months, and it meant putting myself at serious risk of physical harm. But it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to address important issues that we have been debating for decades.

PH: In terms of the data you were collecting and specifically the variables that you chose to study, what were some considerations? Were you mostly trying to address practical or theoretical issues?

PL: The primary aim of the project was to be able to come back and tell future leaders in the Army: "This is what you can expect leadership in combat to be like."

Here's what you need to be prepared to do." So there was a very practical component to the research that we wanted to address. We also wanted to make sure we designed something that could address serious research questions in the published literature and move the field forward.

PH: You also employed a mixed-method design. What was your thinking on that?

PL: Every unit that deploys in combat has a unique experience: the area you're operating in, the people in that particular sector, the type of enemy forces you're facing. Although I knew we needed to ground the research in solid, quantifiable survey data, I also felt that I needed qualitative data to help round out the picture of what was actually happening there. I ended up doing more than a hundred interviews with officers and soldiers of all ranks in order to get a perspective of the organization as a whole. I interviewed everyone from Col. Shroud, who was leading the unit, to the youngest privates who were there doing the hardest and most thankless missions. I actually interviewed a soldier while he was in the process of burning human waste.

PH: What sort of issues do you think are unique to collecting data in the field of combat?

PL: A field study by its very nature is messy. As an example, many of the soldiers that we surveyed at Time 1 left the unit over the course of the study. They exited the service, they went to another location, worked for another unit, or the Army decided to move them. Between the first and second wave of data collection we probably lost around a quarter of the sample. Another factor is that the organization structure may change in response to the demands of the combat zone. For example, one company I was tracking detached from the main organization and ended up working in a completely separate sector of the country. I had to get on a helicopter and fly out into the middle of the desert to follow up on them. I got stuck there for about a week because we couldn't get a helicopter to come in and get me. The living conditions were also quite challenging. I basically lived in a metal shipping container for about 6 weeks. That was okay when there was electricity, but it got pretty miserable when the power went out and it was 130 degrees outside.

But probably the hardest thing to deal with was that the notion of sample mortality takes on a completely different meaning. You work with these guys day in and day out, and you get to know them, and they get to know you. And you come to expect to see them when you return after being away for 6 months. Unfortunately, the nature of combat is that people are wounded and people are killed. So you show up to continue your study and find out that some of the people that you got to know

and like are now dead or severely wounded and that they will never be the same again. That's a very hard thing for a researcher to accept. As a soldier you have to accept it, but as a researcher, you have to accept it on a completely different level because you have privileged access to the innermost thoughts and feelings, their dreams, their fears, and their personal concerns. In one particular case, I interviewed a young lieutenant that I got to know very well. And 10 days after I interviewed him, he was killed in an ambush. And I have the last recording of this young officer's voice. I was in Afghanistan when I was told that he was killed, and I downloaded the recording, put it on a thumb drive, wrote a letter to his mother, and I sent it to her. Nothing you learn in graduate school prepares you for a situation like that.

PH: With regards to conducting research in the field, how receptive are troops and officers to being a part of something like this?

PL: You have to get buy-in from the leadership because they pave the way for you to be successful. They brief subordinate leaders on what is happening and make it important to them. We call it command emphasis. That said, when you're giving surveys and conducting interviews they don't necessarily trust you the first time. But over time, you build that trust. You let them know exactly what you're going to be doing, when you'll be doing it, and why. You've got to be very honest about it. You don't have to tell them specifically necessarily what you're studying, but you've got to be very honest about what is going to happen with the data, who's going to see it, and what it's going to be used for. Soldiers tend to be very concerned about whether or not the chain of command will see their responses and whether they can be honest about their feelings. It helps if you have the unit leadership stand up with you and say, "We're not going to look at your surveys. That would be in violation of the agreement that we have."

PH: How supportive would you say your command structure was? You've mentioned the command structure of the units you were sampling, but what about your own command structure?

PL: At the time of this study I was on faculty at West Point. Luckily, my department head, **Colonel Tom Kolditz**, was also very interested in this research. He underwrote what I was doing and moved things around to make it happen. Another officer from my department, **Colonel Pat Sweeney**, accompanied me on the mission and led a different research project while we were in Iraq. Without support from my department, I could have never gotten this off the ground. Never.

PH: Were there any issues you faced concerning classified data?

PL: Nothing that I did in Iraq could really be called classified. I wasn't out there

chasing down the enemy or doing secret missions. It really isn't that sexy. That said, there were data that we wanted that was classified. We wanted patrol reports so we could talk about what the units were doing on a day-to-day basis in order to give a sense of the actual, everyday experience of this organization. Every time a platoon leaves the outpost and goes outside the wire, to do whatever mission it is they're doing, be it a raid, a humanitarian mission, a patrol, or just be a general presence, when they come back inside the wire, the platoon leader has to write a report of every significant activity that happened during the patrol. The reports contain the names and the faces of suspected insurgents, people who are on lists to interview and potentially apprehend based on criminal or illegal activity. Those patrol reports are classified.

So there were literally thousands of reports that related to this one particular infantry battalion. We approached the unit chain of command after they redeployed, and we convinced them to declassify all of the patrol reports that we were able to get. They agreed and ended up putting in hundreds of hours removing every name and every location that potentially could jeopardize someone. And they turned all of those declassified reports over to us. Those files have provided an excellence record of what was actually happening there.

PH: Scientists are taught to try to be objective and detached from what they study. How is this possible when you're going through the same experiences as your participants?

PL: It's hard. Your very presence influences what's happening. Most of leadership knew that my expertise was on leadership development, so I got a lot of questions about situations and issues they were dealing with in their organizations. And I would have to tell them, "Hey, I'm here to study your problem not to help you solve the problem." Sometimes people came to me wanting therapy, wanting me to be a clinician. They saw me as a psychologist, not a research psychologist, and most people don't know the difference between a clinician and a researcher. Try to explain that to a 19-year-old private first class who just learned that his wife was divorcing him, taking all of his money and his kids. Try telling a soldier, "Hey, there's really not much I can do to necessarily help you in this situation." That's a hard conversation to have. Often, the best that I could do was to suggest that they seek behavioral healthcare. But, in many cases it didn't really matter that I wasn't a clinician. People saw me as a clinician, and they wanted to tell me their story. And in some cases I had to allow them to do that. And when you hear things like that, you end up providing support. Not so much clinical support but the sort of basic support any leader in the army would give to any soldier. But you have to be careful not to cross a line and not to get too terribly involved. It's very hard not to.

PH: How would you say conducting this study has changed your perspective on what it means to be a research psychologist or just the research process in general?

PL: The things that you learn in grad school absolutely still apply. But you also have to be flexible when conducting research in a field setting in order to get things off the ground. You have to be willing to compromise on some things but not compromise on things that are really important to the integrity of the research. For example, I would never compromise on anonymity or confidentiality. But you may not always be able to collect the data exactly where or when you want to. For example, when a unit was detached from the primary battalion and sent to live out in the desert. As a researcher, that wasn't exactly optimal, but you have to accept that the context itself provides plenty of threats to validity. And you have to be prepared that when it comes time to write it up you just have to be honest about the things that happened.

PH: Can you summarize the main findings from your work in the field?

PL: One of the interesting things we found was that while leaders perceived their own leadership style as being fairly comparable as they moved from training into combat, their followers didn't agree. Soldiers rated their commanders much less positively in the combat zone and also reported less trust and transparency in their relationships with their commanders. The officers reflected this sentiment somewhat by reporting that their confidence in their own capacity to lead had diminished since they entered the combat zone. We also found evidence that having an effective leader was a preventative factor in the development of later posttraumatic stress, above and beyond the effects of combat exposure and individual differences. There's a lesson to be had there for managers in all organizations. Highly stressful conditions tend to make effective leadership difficult, but it really makes a difference in the lives of their followers if leaders are doing the things we know are effective in normal circumstances. You still need to treat your followers as unique individuals, you still need to lead by example, and you still need to try to get them motivated each day.

PH: How would you say this work is being received?

PL: I have presented results from this project at several conferences and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. I think that the story of soldiers in combat resonates with people because they recognize that it is an uncommon situation and that people are volunteering to put themselves in danger. And there's just not a lot a research on it, and it's a hard thing to get your hands around. Looking back, there are things I might change, but overall I'm proud of this research.

PH: What are you working on now? And what does the future hold for research in the Army?

PL: Our current agenda is covered pretty well in a recent special issue of *American Psychologist* (2011, Vol. 66, 1) on the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program. My role now is more in program evaluation, applying the scientific method to determine the program's effectiveness. It's probably the largest developmental intervention of psychological resilience that's ever been done. We're also studying the development of psychological resilience in Department of Army civilians and the families of soldiers. As this project progresses, we're also trying to make the most of the data available to us. The Army collects an enormous amount of information on performance, health, leadership, and has some of the best-designed selection tools around. As we move forward, we aim to aggregate and utilize this information to answer really important questions concerning the roles of leadership, personality, overseas appointments, organizational climate, healthcare usage rates, and other topics that are important not just to the Army but all organizations.

I think there's a very bright future for research psychology inside the Army. The last 10 years have been a golden era for research psychology in the Army, and we've been very fortunate to have a lot of good Army research psychologists working for us.