AFTERMATH EXPERIENCE IN COMBAT OPERATIONS: THE CASE OF MILITARY PERSONNEL UNDER 38TH INFANTRY BATTALION IN SOUTH COTABATO, PHILIPPINES

Christian Sina-on[1], Kurt Anthony E. Esgrina[2], Jushua Luis (Candidato) S. Patao[3] and Wilter C. Friales, PhD[4]

[1]Student, Social Science Department, Notre Dame of Marbel University, Philippines
[2]Student, Social Science Department, Notre Dame of Marbel University, Philippines
[3]Student, Social Science Department, Notre Dame of Marbel University, Philippines
[4]Professor 4, Notre Dame of Marbel University, Philippines
(Candidato) S. Patao3, Wilter C. Friales, PhD3

ABSTRACT

This study explored the post-combat experiences of military personnel, focusing on the challenges they face and the factors influencing their well-being. Using qualitative data from interviews with soldiers of the 38th Infantry Battalion, 6th Infantry Division, Philippine Army, the research examined the physical, psychological, and social impacts of combat exposure. It highlighted the complexities of trauma, resilience, and recovery, providing a comprehensive understanding of how combat affects soldiers' lives. The study identified key themes, such as the interplay between individual and collective experiences, and underscores the significance of addressing these challenges through targeted interventions. Findings emphasized the critical role of support systems, particularly strong family connections, cohesive unit relationships, and effective leadership, in facilitating successful reintegration. These elements are vital for helping soldiers transition to post-combat life. The study also highlighted the need for accessible support services, such as mental health care programs, peer networks, and family-focused interventions, to address their multifaceted needs. By offering insights into the intricacies of post-combat life, this research contributed to developing strategies that enhance the well-being of military personnel and support broader efforts to improve policies and programs for their recovery and reintegration.

KEYWORDS: aftermath experiences, combat operation, military personnel, support systems, military infantry

INTRODUCTION

Military infantry in the Philippines is often the first to respond in crucial crises that endanger lives and work relentlessly to maintain national peace and security. Their steadfast commitment and prompt action make them indispensable in ensuring the welfare of the populace. They were always on the move, working in different areas and regularly encountering stressful events that left them

vulnerable to mental health problems (Fajarito & De Guzman, 2017). For these soldiers to do their responsibilities precisely, they must endure rigorous training, maintain mental discipline, and have a strong sense of patriotism. Candidates for these elite professions are selected based on their physical and psychological characteristics, particularly their capacity to deal with stress. Military infantry in the Philippines face significant challenges during and after conflict, especially in dense forest areas. The unpredictability and intensity of combat emphasize how important it is to be resilient and adaptable. Unexpected challenges including poor intelligence and challenging terrain increased stress and resulted in high-risk, near-suicidal circumstances despite careful planning (Fonbuena, 2014).

The study by McDevitt-Murphy and Henschel (2018) highlighted significant mental health challenges faced by military personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly those involved in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Among these challenges, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance abuse were notably prevalent. Many soldiers returning from deployment reported severe PTSD symptoms, which often correlated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes post-deployment. While the direct effects of combat are widely acknowledged, the study emphasized the need to address the "aftermath of battle" experiences, non-life-threatening situations that soldiers encounter immediately after combat that can contribute to long-term physical injuries and psychological trauma.

These challenges are further compounded by the difficulties of transitioning back to civilian life. Many veterans struggle with strained family relationships and feelings of survivor's guilt, which add to their emotional burdens. Similar patterns can be observed among veterans in the Philippines, where mental health issues such as PTSD and depression are prevalent among those returning from service. Recognizing these issues, the Armed Forces of the Philippines have made strides in enhancing mental health services to support soldiers' psychological well-being, addressing both combat-related trauma and reintegration challenges.

This study aimed to explore and understand the aftermath experiences of soldiers in combat operations. This study sought to learn how soldiers deal with the physical, mental, and emotional effects of war, and how support from others helps them heal and return to their everyday lives. By focusing on the aftermath experience of military personnel in combat operations, the study sought to understand the long-term consequences of war on soldiers and the importance of providing the right kind of help so they can successfully transition back into their normal lives. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of what soldiers go through after combat, which would then help to improve health services, mental health care, and support systems to improve their overall well-being.

Review of Related Literature

This section presents the related literature needed in supporting this study. The journals, dissertations, and internet sources were relevant to further understand and describe the aftermath experience of military personnel in combat operations.

Aftermath Experience of Military Personnel

In today's warfare, military personnel face tough challenges in the aftermath experience in combat operations. They deal with unpredictable situations, changing tactics, and the stress of being away from home. Technology plays a big role, making their job even harder. All these factors can take a toll on their mental and emotional well-being. Military personnel face multifaceted challenges in combat operations, requiring resilience and adaptability to succeed on the battlefield (Kaur et al. 2017).

The negative effects of anxiety-related events may impact a person's ability to function. Physiological health and psychological health impact positivism, self-worth and resilience of particular deployed men stationed in Philippine military camps (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000 as cited in Reyes et al., 2020) Also optimism appeared to be an essential component of resilience for an individual to withstand stressful events in the aftermath of combat operations.

While combat operations pose significant challenges to soldiers' well-being, research indicates a remarkable capacity for resilience within this population. A 2021 study by Lester et al. on "Military Psychology" highlighted that despite the potential for lasting mental and physical health impacts, many soldiers demonstrated an ability to adapt, recover, and thrive. This resilience stems from a combination of individual factors and social support, emphasizing the need to recognize and foster this strength to facilitate successful reintegration and overall well-being for military personnel.

As stated by Pickering (2017), conflict between work and family roles results in stress due to the depletion of resources required to manage both responsibilities effectively. Resources like time and energy are finite and can be diminished when attempting to balance work and family obligations. This loss of resources can lead to a negative state of well-being, manifesting as symptoms like depression, anxiety, physiological tension, or job dissatisfaction.

The ability to bounce back and cope is essential for soldiers after they have been in combat operations. Bouncing back encompasses the ability to adapt successfully to challenging circumstances, including withstanding, recovering from stress, trauma, and adversity. Resilient individuals not only survive but thrive despite difficulties, maintaining their equilibrium and developing adaptive mechanisms to cope with future challenges. In psychology, resilience is seen as the positive capacity of individuals to navigate significant adversity, trauma, or stress, returning to a state of balance after disruption, and building resistance to future challenges through exposure to stressors (Lagacé-Roy & Jacob 2017).

Skirpkina et al. (2021) stated that the demanding nature of military service, coupled with the high-stakes responsibilities, can significantly impact the personal aspect of military personnel in several ways. The intense training and constant exposure to potential threats can lead to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and trauma among service members, affecting their mental and emotional well-being. The expectation for unwavering commitment and the need to perform under extreme circumstances, including risking their own lives, can create significant personal challenges.

According to Sylwestrzak (2023) the requirements for military service extend beyond mere technical skills, encompassing personal attributes vital for success in the armed forces. Military personnel must possess specific knowledge, skills, and personality predispositions tailored to their roles. This underscores the significance of military personnel, as their effectiveness and ability to navigate the

complexities of military operations depend not only on technical proficiency but also on their individual characteristics. The process of professional preparation, which includes both formal education and upbringing, plays a crucial role in shaping the personal profile of military personnel.

In addition, the rearing of children and the psychological strain on partners who find it impossible to organize their daily lives without the military personnel's presence would be impacted by the physical separation of the military personnel. striving to uphold the sense of closeness connected to conventional expectations about family dynamics and a "good" family life. This implies that military personnel are accountable for preserving their close relationships within their families (Maj et al., 2017).

According to Sharma et al., (2014) interpersonal relationship pressures, problems or disputes with family, neighbors, friends, coworkers, or other individuals in their close proximity are examples of psychosocial stressors. The people exposed to stress will be able to respond positively to stressors if their experiences with family and friends are productive and helpful. In addition, the people whose experiences with their family have been mostly negative and unsupportive will find stress to be more stressful and disruptive.

Military personnel struggled to balance the demands of their profession with their personal lives, often straining family dynamics and social connections. Moral and ethical dilemmas inherent in military operations weighed heavily on service members, causing moral distress and impacting their sense of identity and purpose. The direct impact of their actions on societal safety and security added to this burden, creating a profound sense of responsibility and moral obligation. The demanding and high-pressure environment of military service had profound effects on the personal well-being, relationships, and sense of identity of military personnel. These challenges highlighted the need for robust support systems and resources to address their unique struggles. Many service members experienced difficulties reintegrating into civilian life after deployments. The cumulative effect of these stressors often led to mental health challenges. Therefore, comprehensive support for military personnel became increasingly crucial (Skripkina et al., 2021).

Hsieh and Tsai (2019) mentioned that work-related stress among military personnel can significantly impact their relationships with others, both within and outside the military context. High levels of stress may lead to irritability, mood swings, and difficulty in managing emotions, making it challenging to maintain healthy interactions with colleagues, superiors, and subordinates. Stress can affect communication skills, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts within teams. Outside the military, the strain caused by work-related stress can spill over into personal relationships, affecting family dynamics, friendships, and social interactions. Military personnel experiencing stress may withdraw from social activities, become less engaged with loved ones, or exhibit behaviors that strain relationships, such as anger outbursts or emotional detachment.

One of the most recent ideas on social well-being that addresses an individual basis is the Keyes social wellbeing theory and an eudaemonic approach. According to this theory, there are five potential components that make up an individual's social well-being and these are social cohesion, acceptance, contribution, and social actualization and social cohesiveness. All of these aspects represent the difficulties that people encounter in their social lives (Pouya, 2018).

According to Thurid (2022), social support, particularly from romantic partners, plays a significant role in promoting health and well-being in military populations, including improved sleep quality and reduced pain. A workplace intervention that incorporates supervisor supportiveness training and worker sleep tracking can enhance the well-being and social connection of military couples.

In the study of Melgarejo et. al (2020), the aftermath of the Marawi siege provided significant insights of military personnel's experiences. The Armed Forces of the Philippines faced one of their most challenging missions, contending with new and unfamiliar strategies employed by the Maute fighters. Despite these unforeseen circumstances, the military's success in overcoming the Maute fighters and foreign terrorists, and ultimately freeing Marawi, brought a profound sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. This victory highlighted the personal resilience and adaptability of the soldiers, as well as their ability to maintain strong relational bonds and social cohesion under extreme stress. The experience emphasized the critical role of adaptive strategies in supporting the well-being and effectiveness of military personnel in complex combat scenarios.

Sylwia and Olga (2018) suggested that soldiers' well-being was not significantly correlated with the intensity of their combat experience, indicating that other elements may be involved in the psychological effects of military missions such as financial problems, arguments between their families and conflict within their colleagues. Mental health conditions have been associated with a greater rate of factors such as not telling the family about the challenges soldiers face.

As stated by Ramyer et al. (2017), fostering psychological empowerment among military personnel after a combat operation involves creating a supportive environment where past successes are acknowledged, and future accomplishments encouraged. It also entails aligning individual goals with broader organizational objectives, granting autonomy and control over work environments, and providing opportunities for skill development. This approach aims to enhance individuals' sense of impact, competence, and control, ultimately promoting their well-being and effectiveness in their roles.

Emotional support, like psychological reassurance and access to social networks, bolstered military personnel's confidence and self-esteem. Instrumental support, including tangible assistance, enhanced their sense of reliability and reinforced their social identity as dependable individuals. Advice and guidance from military peers and mentors developed social competence and decision-making skills, shaping their social self-concept. Companionship and social inclusion fostered a sense of belonging and strengthened bonds within the military community. These forms of social support played a crucial role in shaping how military personnel perceived themselves socially, influencing their relationships and interactions (Hsieh & Tsai, 2019).

Diachenko et al. (2024) stated that supporting the psychological well-being of military personnel is deemed essential to complementing military assistance in accomplishing military goals, thereby bolstering military capability. It is believed that fostering better communication and facilitating discussions among military personnel can enhance their adaptability to military operations, mitigate the effects of stressful circumstances, and enhance the achievement of objectives.

Military Personnel Support Systems

Support plays a crucial role in helping military personnel and their families maintain resilience. This support can come in the form of formal organizational programs and policies, as well as informal assistance from supportive individuals within the Chain of Command, especially direct supervisors. By providing such support, the military can better equip its members to navigate the challenges posed by balancing work and family demands. Therefore, it is in the military's best interest to minimize this conflict and bolster the resilience of its members (Pickering, 2017).

Fajarito and De Guzman (2017) stated in their local study in the Philippines that support from the military personnel's social networks encourages them to seek treatment. Their family, friends, and organization officers even showed their compassion towards them. Through an accepting and compassionate approach, the military personnel were able to overcome their fears. They were feeling more motivated and becoming hopeful towards recovery after being deployed in a stressful environment.

In addition, the Philippine Army's Education, Training, and Development (ET&D) program emphasizes the importance of developing standardized qualification criteria for instructors and curriculum developers, and the continuous monitoring and improvement of personnel's knowledge and competency through high-quality training programs. These measures aim to equip military personnel with the necessary skills and resilience to manage the psychological impacts of their combat experiences effectively.

Nevarez et al. (2017) stated that better peer relationship quality during deployment may reduce the likelihood of subsequent PTSD symptom development. Additionally, the quality of early relationships may set the stage for better relationships during war. These results have implications for PTSD risk factor screening prior to deployment and highlight the importance of interpersonal support among military personnel during deployment.

Furthermore, Cacioppo et al. (2015) stated that building social resilience in military personnel is a crucial part of their well-being. It increases their military hardiness, empathy to other colleagues, and perspective-taking with others. It also helps to decrease their loneliness of being isolated from family for a long period of time.

Challenges in Combat Operations

Eugene (2016) stated that military personnel face numerous challenges in complex military operations, including anti-insurgency and anti-terrorism campaigns. They often operate in physically demanding and hostile environments, which can include rugged terrains, extreme weather conditions, and limited access to basic amenities. Combat personnel also face the constant threat of enemy attacks, ambushes, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which put their lives at risk. The presence of non-conventional armed groups, such as insurgents and terrorists, who do not adhere to municipal and international laws, further complicates the situation.

Military personnel are thrust into unfamiliar, dangerous, and potentially psychologically traumatic situations that include exposure to numerous physical and psychological risks. They may also encounter death, environmental contaminants, infectious diseases and lack of medical or human

resources. The exposures to these events place military personnel at risk for developing diverse posttraumatic stress injuries (Ein et al. 2023).

According to Eugene and Osakwe (2016) in modern combat operations, military personnel face challenges combating violent extremism globally. Adversaries ignore laws, leading to long conflicts with heavy costs. These challenges include lack of understanding of unique operational difficulties, flawed strategic approaches, and the protracted nature of conflicts. It sheds light on these challenges and explores the distinct obstacles faced by military personnel in complex combat environments.

Ford (2015) stated that in combat zones, military personnel encounter a variety of daunting challenges that assess their physical, psychological, and emotional resilience. The environment is characterized by unpredictability and constant peril from enemy attacks, explosions, and harsh weather. Military personnel also contend with scarce resources and the ongoing uncertainty of combat situations, intensifying their burden. They must confront moral and ethical quandaries on the battlefield, making tough choices that challenge their beliefs and self-conception.

Military personnel faced unique challenges during reintegration after combat and deployment. Some transitioned smoothly, but others encountered serious medical and mental health issues requiring treatment. Mental health problems, such as depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation, were prevalent among returning veterans, particularly those with prior mental health histories. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) and experiences of sexual assault were also common, significantly impacting emotional well-being. These challenges not only affected the service member but also strained their relationships, with PTSD often leading to emotional withdrawal and communication difficulties. Military personnel sometimes developed insecure attachment styles in response to war trauma, contributing to unhealthy couple interactions during reintegration. Intimacy issues, including changes in sexual functioning, further compounded the challenges faced by military couples (Redmond et al. 2015).

PTSD in the military is common and widely affects the armed forces of the Philippines and in every military personnel around the world. PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a psychological condition resulting from exposure to traumatic events. It is characterized by symptoms such as re-experiencing the event, avoidance, changes in beliefs and emotions, and heightened physiological arousal. Treatment options include psychotherapy and pharmacological treatment (Messman, 2023).

The prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among military personnel in the Philippines is significant, often increasing after exposure to pre-deployment stressors. Research indicates that a considerable number of military personnel experience chronic PTSD, even years after active combat operations. In the Philippines, high levels of combat-related stress were reported among military personnel, particularly in divisions engaged in frequent attacks. Military personnel commonly exhibit reactions such as intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and heightened physiological responses following extreme stress, which may lead to a diagnosis of PTSD if symptoms persist (Fajarito & De Guzman, 2017).

Filipino soldiers returning from combat faced a variety of complex challenges, as noted by Knight and Theodorakis (2019). PTSD related to combat exposure was a major concern, given the frequent exposure to traumatic events that affected soldiers' mental and overall well-being. Although PTSD is

better understood, the specific factors that make some soldiers more vulnerable remained unclear. Studies showed that while not every soldier developed PTSD, those who did suffered significant mental health problems, emphasizing the importance of providing specialized support and treatment after combat.

In the Marawi siege, recognized as Southeast Asia's most severe terror event in the past 15 years, inflicted significant physical, emotional, and psychological damage on soldiers, with 165 government forces killed and over 1400 wounded. Despite the profound impact of such combat experiences, there is limited information on how soldiers navigate and make sense of their experiences during and after combat. The prevalence of combat-related PTSD among soldiers emphasized the need to study the specific factors contributing to resilience and effective coping mechanisms. Collaborative efforts during the Marawi conflict, prioritizing both military and civilian welfare, underscore the importance of holistic support strategies for long-term mental health recovery of military personnel (Sasot, 2020).

Coping Strategies

Individuals employing problem-focused coping strategies attempted to address the root causes of their problems by acquiring information and developing relevant skills. This approach aimed to directly change or remove the source of stress. Conversely, emotion-focused coping focused on managing the emotional distress associated with stress, such as releasing pent-up feelings, using distractions, controlling anger, and practicing relaxation techniques. As Brannon (2009, cited in Sharma et al., 2014) explained, emotion-focused coping was centered on managing the emotions triggered by perceived stress.

Military personnel show a strong and positive connection between emotional coping strategies and overall happiness. Military personnel frequently handle important situations, and since they are in a position where their decisions are final and that they are unable to show any weakness or weakness, they often lack a helpful attitude and a desire to seek support for others (Sharma et al., 2014).

According to Tracey et al. (2016), there are five different coping strategies that were adopted by the veterans which are the cognitive, religiosity/spirituality methods, drug and alcohol sedation, avoidance, and behavioral approaches. These are the strategies that were used by the veterans during their time as military personnel for them to cope with the stressful situations during and after combat operations.

Military personnel face many stressors throughout their career. These stressors are categorized into six areas (social, workplace, occupational, personnel familial, and military related factors). Military personnel are more likely to use problem-oriented coping mechanisms when dealing with their problems or dealing with their stressors rather than using emotion driven solutions (Sepahvand et al., 2020).

According to Kuan-Jung et al. (2018), military personnel have different ways in dealing with their stressors. One of the coping mechanisms that has a higher impact in the military personnel is the approach-oriented coping mechanism where it boosts their resilience within them and leads them to a better psychological well-being.

According to Maghuyop (2023), effective coping strategies for Philippine military personnel in the aftermath of combat operations are crucial for their mental health and overall well-being. Research indicates that the quality of education and training provided to soldiers plays a significant role in their ability to cope with post-combat stress. This includes having qualified, competent, and committed education and training staff, as well as maintaining an optimal student-instructor ratio to ensure personalized and effective learning experience.

Theoretical Lens

The complicated nature of combat experiences and their aftermath among military personnel serving in the 38th Infantry Battalion was explored in this study. Utilizing previous studies on human dynamics in military operations, this study aimed at exploring how combat exposure affected soldiers' quality of life, adaptability, and well-being in the aftermath of combat operations.

The study described the aftermath experiences of military personnel under the 38th Infantry Battalion. By incorporating theories of resilience and stress and coping, the study sought to understand the soldiers' responses. Resilience is defined as an individual's ability to function with little to no disruption. Under another framework, resilience was viewed as the capacity to recover from sudden, understandably upsetting situations and from the initial preclinical responses and shortcomings (Litz, 2014). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping model suggested that effective coping with stressful situations, such as experiencing sexism, depended on the individual's cognitive assessment of the stressor and the specific behavioral coping strategies they employed. Through the application of this theory to the study, researchers were able to gain a better understanding of soldier's individual experiences, coping strategies, and responses during challenging situations.

This study aimed to explore the aftermath experiences of soldiers in the 38th Infantry Battalion, focusing on the challenges they faced and the factors that contributed to their well-being in the aftermath of combat operations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study aimed to describe the aftermath experiences in combat operations experienced by the military personnel under the 38th Infantry Battalion, based in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato. Specifically, this study addressed the following questions:

1. How may the aftermath experience in combat operations of military personnel be described?
2. How do military personnel understand their aftermath experience in combat operations?
3. How does the aftermath experience in combat operations of military personnel impact their relationship with others?

METHOD

Research Design

This research employed a single holistic case study approach to delve deeply into the individual experiences of military personnel. The case study design allowed for a comprehensive examination of the aftermath experiences, capturing the exemplary aspects and complexities of each military personnel. Moreover, it helped to understand the uniqueness of each case and the intricacies of their experiences, as well as how those aftermath experiences impacted their personal lives, relationships with others, and social lives. The case focused on a single organization and aimed to explore the

aftermath experiences of military personnel. This approach enabled the researchers to extract answers describing the aftermath experiences of each personnel and to explore the changes and impacts of these experiences on their personal well-being. The researchers defined the scope to focus on the effects of the aftermath experiences on the lives of military personnel, specifically the 38th Infantry Battalion, based in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato.

Setting

The study was conducted in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato, specifically in the Alpha Company, 38th Infantry Battalion, at Brgy. Derilon, Municipality of Banga, which derives its name from the word "Buanga," a 1st class municipality in the province of South Cotabato. The participants were from the Alpha Company, recognized as one of the best companies of the 38th Infantry Battalion, out of the three companies stationed in the province of South Cotabato. The unit was known as one of the fastest reaction forces deployed to various operations in the province of South Cotabato.

Participants

The participants in this study were selected based on specific criteria to ensure the relevance and validity of the research findings. The researchers interviewed a total of three (3) participants based on their availability, their current state which determined by their commanding officer to assure that they are capable of answering the questions and to ensure that the interviews did not affect their duty details. These participants had been deployed to several military combat operations and experienced the realities of combat, such as witnessing enemies being captured or neutralized, as well as seeing casualties among their comrades. The participants in this study were all male military personnel from the 38th Infantry (We Clear) Battalion, 6th Infantry Division, Philippine Army, with several combat experiences. The first participant is Sergeant Frederico, has several experiences in combat operations in Mindanao, serving the AFP since 2017. The next participant is Corporal Antonio, with several combat experiences when he was assigned at Maguindanao up until he was assigned in South Cotabato and the third participant is Corporal Jose, the youngest participant in this study who has experiences in combat operations since he was a private up until now. These participants have undergone basic and advanced courses in the Philippine Army training programs that enhanced their capabilities in combat operations. Participants included in this study met specific criteria, including a rank ranging from Private First Class (PFC) to Lieutenant (LT), at least four (4) deployments, five to fifteen years of service and with recent combat operation.

Research Instrument

An in-depth interview guide was developed by the researchers and utilized to document the experiences and understand the situation, challenges, and coping strategies of military personnel under the 38th Infantry Battalion. This exploratory and open-ended approach aimed to gather comprehensive data. The interview guide focused on three main questions derived from the research problem.

In formulating the questions for this guide, the researchers utilized resilience theory and the stress and coping theory as frameworks. The process began with drafting the initial questions based on the study's objectives and theoretical foundations. These questions were then subjected to expert evaluation, where a panel of specialists assessed their clarity, relevance, and alignment with the statement of the problem. After this, the questions underwent a translation process to ensure they were linguistically and culturally appropriate for the target participants. The translated questions were reviewed to

maintain their original intent and ensure their suitability for the participants. Finally, the interview guide was subjected to a thorough review by the panel of experts before being approved for implementation.

To enhance the tool's effectiveness, a combination of structured approach and flexible discussion was employed. This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of all essential topics while allowing participants to provide detailed and insightful responses, aligning effectively with the study's objectives.

Data Gathering Procedures

In gathering data, the researchers observed the following steps.

The researchers formulated the protocols, such as informed consent and interview guide questions, which were presented to the board of ethics for approval. After receiving approval, the researchers requested an available counselor from the Notre Dame of Marbel University Guidance and Testing Center to accompany them during the interviews. The researchers drafted a request letter for the interviews, which was signed by the research adviser, program coordinator, and college dean, and then sent to the commanding officer of the 38th Infantry Battalion, based in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato. Upon approval by the commanding officer, the researchers scheduled the interview dates in accordance with the availability of the chosen participants and informed the counselor to ensure their availability and guidance during the interviews. The researchers provided informed consent forms to the chosen participants before conducting the in-depth interviews regarding their aftermath experiences. All digital and physical data collected were stored in an encrypted flash drive and a locked physical storage unit to ensure the confidentiality of the data.

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized thematic analysis in analyzing and processing the collected data from the in-depth interviews. This method, guided by Braun and Clarke's approach, involved a systematic six-step process for analyzing qualitative data, emphasizing the importance of theoretical positioning and flexibility in interpretation (Alina & David, 2023). Thematic analysis provided a structured yet adaptable framework for identifying patterns and themes within the dataset, offering a detailed and nuanced analytical account of the data (Garrydilger, 2022). The ultimate goal was to identify significant or intriguing patterns, termed themes, and use them to discuss the research or make a point. This approach uncovered underlying meanings, concepts, and insights within qualitative data, allowing the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena.

The six steps in this process included the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data by reading and noting initial observations, generating initial codes to label relevant data segments, searching for themes by sorting different codes, reviewing and refining these themes, defining and naming each theme to capture its essence, and finally producing the report by writing up the analysis with vivid examples. This structured approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the qualitative data collected from the in-depth interviews, enabling the researchers to generate new insights, interpret findings accurately, and produce trustworthy and insightful results that contributed to the field's body of knowledge (Dawadi, 2020).

Ethical Considerations

The study explored the aftermath experiences of military personnel in combat operations, including the challenges they faced in their daily lives and the coping mechanisms they practiced. The study was grounded in the principles of participant safety, confidentiality, and informed consent, given the sensitive nature of the research topic. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, with participants retaining the right to withdraw at any time without penalty and to refuse to answer any question they found uncomfortable. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits.

To address potential psychological risks, a counselor from Notre Dame of Marbel University's Guidance and Testing Center was present during the interviews to provide immediate emotional support if required. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing participants' identities through the use of pseudonyms and separating personal identifiers from the collected data. Data was securely stored in encrypted digital files and locked physical storage, accessible only to the research team, and it was destroyed securely after the required retention period, in compliance with institutional and legal guidelines.

The study avoided discussing sensitive operational details, focusing instead on general aftermath experiences to safeguard participants and maintain ethical boundaries. Participants were reimbursed only for expenses incurred during participation, with no additional payments provided. These ethical safeguards were implemented to protect participants' rights, minimize risks, and uphold the integrity of the research process, ensuring the findings could contribute meaningfully to understanding the psychological, emotional, and relational impacts of combat operations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section delves into the findings of the study, "Aftermath Experience in Combat Operations: The Case of Military Personnel under the 38th Infantry Battalion based in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato." The aftermath experience of military combat operations, was analyzed by exploring how they described their challenges and, crucially, how they navigated these experiences daily. In adherence to ethical guidelines, the researchers employed pseudonyms associated with the participants to maintain their anonymity. The pseudonyms to these military personnel are as follows:

The first participant is Sergeant Frederico, who has several experiences in combat operations here in Mindanao, serving the AFP since 2017. The next participant is Corporal Antonio, also with several combat experiences when he was assigned at Maguindanao up until he was assigned in South Cotabato and Corporal Jose, the youngest participant in this study who has experiences in combat operations since he was a private up until now. All of them are all-male military personnel from the 38th Infantry (We Clear) Battalion, 6th Infantry Division, Philippine Army.

This section discusses the changes in behavioral responses among soldiers following their deployment in combat operations. It emphasizes the effects of trauma and the adaptive behaviors developed to cope with distress in response to exposure to life-threatening situations. These experiences not only shape the way soldiers react but also influence their daily functioning, leaving lasting imprints on their psyche.

The experiences of Federico, Antonio, and Jose show how combat changes the way soldiers react and behave, even after leaving the battlefield. Federico describes how hearing a sudden sound while washing dishes made him drop to the ground, as if he were back in a life-threatening situation.

> *"Ako may headset man ko mag tapos sito paghugas ko sang pinggan pang ring sang headset ko ang trauma ko duw abi ko kung ano na. Maka drop nako dayun ba, gahugas ka pinggan amuna siya. Tapos arang lupok bigla ka makibot makahapa ka dayun ba."*

This shows how their bodies and minds become trained to react instantly to danger, even in safe places. Jose also shared how even small noises can startle him during rest, keeping him on edge and ready to respond, as if the danger is still there.

> *"may ara naman sir, ng tulad ng mag pahinga ka tapos may gamay lang nga ano kalasing ba kibot ka ba tapos para maka react ka dayon na ano*

These are examples of how combat rewires their instincts, making them hypervigilant and reactive to things that would not usually be alarming. Combat also affects how soldiers handle emotions and make decisions. Federico talked about the fear and shaking he feels from his trauma but explained that firing his rifle helps him calm down, showing how soldiers find ways to cope with things that are connected to their combat training. Antonio, on the other hand, shared how panic and confusion during a fight made him fire his weapon without thinking, only to realize later it could hurt someone on his own side. Lastly Jose shared about being aware even in the comfort of a safe environment. Ford's (2015) observation highlighted how the constant threats and stress of combat lead to lasting changes in soldiers' behavioral responses. Even as soldiers tried to suppress these emotions, the mental exhaustion and stress linger, leading to altered reactions such as increased reactivity and avoidance. This shows how combat reshapes both their emotional and behavioral patterns, leaving a lasting impact on their daily functioning.

Emotional Setbacks sheds light on the emotional toll soldiers face during and after combat operations, emphasizing how trauma and loss affect their morale and psychological well-being. Frederico, Antonio, and Jose all described how witnessing the injury or death of comrades can cause significant emotional strain, resulting in feelings of low morale and sadness. Frederico mentioned the helplessness of seeing a teammate suffer, which directly impacts his mood and ability to stay motivated.

> *"tagsa ma low morale ka kung lalo na kauban mo nakita mo na disgrasya, di maiwasan na ma low morale ka gyapon, luya kaba kay kauban mo lang."*

Antonio reflected on the collective low morale that spreads among the group when a fellow soldier was injured, while Jose shared the emotional burden of operating with an incomplete team, which deepens the sense of loss and hopelessness.

> *"ma ano ka, minsan ma low morale ka, malungkot ka lang may ma disgrasya saimo mga kasama tapos kanang magbalik ka sa operation.. ay tapos operation ng kulang gid kamo haw, te syempre ma ano kami mo, mag luya gid kami hehehe kay balik kamo nga kulang ."*

These statements illustrate the ambivalence soldiers feel after combat, experiencing both relief for surviving and guilt for not being able to prevent harm to others. The emotional strain of dealing with this sense of incompleteness after returning from deployment underscores the psychological challenges soldiers face as they try to reconcile the harsh realities of combat with their sense of duty and the

aftermath of their experiences. The emotional setbacks described here reflect the long-lasting impact of combat trauma, manifesting as grief, guilt, and diminished morale. This emotional strain is exacerbated by the stress of managing combat-related trauma and the trauma of witnessing the injury or loss of comrades. As highlighted by Kaur et al. (2017), the need for mental health support becomes increasingly evident, as soldiers must cope not only with the intense conditions they faced in combat but also with the lasting emotional consequences that affect their well-being long after deployment. Addressing these long-term psychological effects is critical to supporting soldiers' mental health and resilience in the aftermath of their experiences.

The critical importance of soldiers understanding their roles in combat operations. Here, it emphasizes how role clarity ensures both individual and team safety. Frederico explained that each soldier has a specific task that must be fulfilled to guarantee the group's survival and safe return, underscoring the collective responsibility of the team.

> *"Ang number 1 bawat isa samon may kanya kayang role na dapat magampanan mo dapat, kung ano ang role mo para ligtas kamo, paghalin niyo buo kamo, dapat pagbalik buo gyapon kamo. Bawat role niyo gampanan niyo bawat isa sainyo."*

Antonio stressed the importance of following commands, even when exhausted, as adhering to orders ensures coordination and reduces the risks during operations. Similarly, Jose pointed out that deviating from assigned roles or creating personal plans can lead to dangerous outcomes, emphasizing the necessity of trusting the chain of command.

> *"Sunod lang gid, sunod lang ka sa mga command sa suqad leader, fire team leader, pati sa platoon leader tapusan gid sunod lang gid ka, hindi kagid mag siling nga pa buo kalang sang sarili mo nga plano kay amu gid nang number 1 nga ikapahamak mo uyat mo kabuhi mo."*

Military personnel understand their aftermath experiences in combat operations by reflecting on the emotional, psychological, and practical challenges they faced after deployment. The clarity of their roles and disciplined adherence to commands, as emphasized by Frederico, Antonio, and Jose, helped them process their experiences and found meaning in their actions. This understanding aligns with Sylwestrzak's (2023) observation that military effectiveness relies on specialized skills and personal attributes, which also play a role on how soldiers cope with the aftermath of combat. By drawing on their training, trust in the chain of command, and the support of their comrades, soldiers navigate the emotional weight of loss, the complexity of guilt, and the drive to fulfill their responsibilities, enabling them to make sense of their experiences and integrate them into their post-combat lives.

The succeeding tables (Table 4 and 5) present the thematic analysis of SOP 3 on the impact of aftermath experience in combat operations of military personnel's relationship to others. The theme "Strengthening the Connection with Family" and "Fostering Unity and developing a spirit of reliance within leaders and members" emerged from the significant statements of the military personnel's aftermath experience in combat operations.

Strengthening the Connection with Family" becomes a crucial aspect of a soldier's reintegration and recovery. Returning home to loved ones can be a source of immense comfort and support, but it also presents unique challenges. Soldiers may struggle to reconnect with family members who have adapted to their absence, and they may find it difficult to communicate the profound experiences they

have endured. Prioritizing family connection during this period involves actively rebuilding intimacy, communicating openly and honestly, and participating in shared activities that foster a sense of normalcy and belonging. Strengthening these bonds can provide a vital lifeline for soldiers navigating the complexities of post-combat life, offering a sense of stability, love, and understanding as they transition back into their roles within the family unit.

When a soldier returns home alive from combat, their family is overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. It is a powerful mix of emotions. There is the incredible relief that their loved one is finally safe and sound, back home where they belong. This often comes with a wave of joy and disbelief, as if they cannot quite believe that the long wait is finally over. Along with this relief comes a deep gratitude for the soldier's safe return. Families are thankful for their loved one's survival, but also for their service and sacrifice. It is a moment to appreciate the preciousness of life and the strength of family bonds, knowing they have weathered a difficult storm and come out stronger on the other side.

> *"Malipay ang mga anak mo, malipay ang asawa mo na nakauwi ka sa kanila na ligtas ka."*

Support plays a crucial role in helping military personnel and their families maintain resilience. This support can come in the form of formal organizational programs and policies, as well as informal assistance from supportive individuals within the Chain of Command, especially direct supervisors. By providing such support, the military can better equip its members to navigate the challenges posed by balancing work and family demands. Therefore, it is in the military's best interest to minimize this conflict and bolster the resilience of its members (Pickering 2017).

> *"Kung ano sa sarili ko na…. kis a pagbaba namon na halin sa operation, magtawag gid ko sa akon mag ina. Kay normal lang na abi ang operation saamon eh, sabagay sundalo man kami kay trabaho namon na."*

By providing emotional support, such as psychological reassurance and acceptance, social networks can bolster military personnel's confidence and self-esteem in social settings. Instrumental support, which involves tangible assistance and material aid, can enhance their sense of reliability and capability, reinforcing their social identity as dependable members of their community. Advice and guidance from peers and mentors within the military network can contribute to the development of social competence and decision-making skills, shaping their social self-concept.

Companionship and social inclusion create a sense of belonging and camaraderie, strengthening connections among service members and encouraging positive social interactions. Social support is essential in shaping the self-perception of military personnel, impacting their relationships and interactions both within and beyond their military community.It is important for soldiers to stick together and rely on each other. They need their leaders and fellow soldiers to understand what they have been through, offer support, and share their experiences. When soldiers have strong bonds and trust each other, it creates a support system that helps them deal with the challenges of coming home, work through their experiences, and successfully transition back to their normal lives.

Soldiers depend on each other for their lives. This creates incredibly strong bonds of trust and respect, both between fellow soldiers and towards their leaders. They know that in the heat of battle, they need to rely on each other completely. This trust means believing that everyone will do their job, have each other's backs, and make the right decisions under pressure. It is about knowing that your fellow soldiers

are skilled, reliable, and committed to the mission just as much as you are. It helps soldiers overcome fear and function as a cohesive unit, even in the most challenging situations.

> *"Lalo na mga bago sulod sa serbisyo, arang way pa agi encounter gina ano sang amon mga senior, gina guidance ba para hindi ma trauma amuna siya."*

> *"Nang ano lang pati lang sa guidance sang nakataas saimo."*

Soldiers need to trust and respect each other. Soldiers respect their colleagues and officers who are good at their jobs, make smart choices, and care about them. Leaders also respect their soldiers for their skills and hard work. This means everyone works together as a team, knows what they need to do, and feels important. It is one of the important aspects for soldiers to stay safe and complete their missions when things get dangerous.

> *"Number 1 respeto, dapat may respeto ka sa kapwa mo tao, biskan ano pa na siya dapat respetohon mo na sila."*

Soldiers are trained to maintain the highest standards of conduct and respect toward civilians, understanding their duty as protectors and defenders of the people. This respect is reflected in their dedication to minimizing harm to non-combatants, following rules of engagement, and treating everyone with dignity and courtesy. Even though soldiers are closest to their fellow soldiers, they also understand that it is important to treat regular people with trust and respect. They understand that people need to feel they can rely on the military to do serve and protect. This is important because it keeps soldiers motivated, shows that the military cares, and helps them do their jobs better. Soldiers highly value the trust and respect of the civilian population they serve. This trust is seen as essential for maintaining morale, legitimacy, and operational effectiveness. Soldiers understand that they are ultimately accountable to the civilian government and that their actions reflect on the military as a whole (Kreps & Edelstein, 2023).
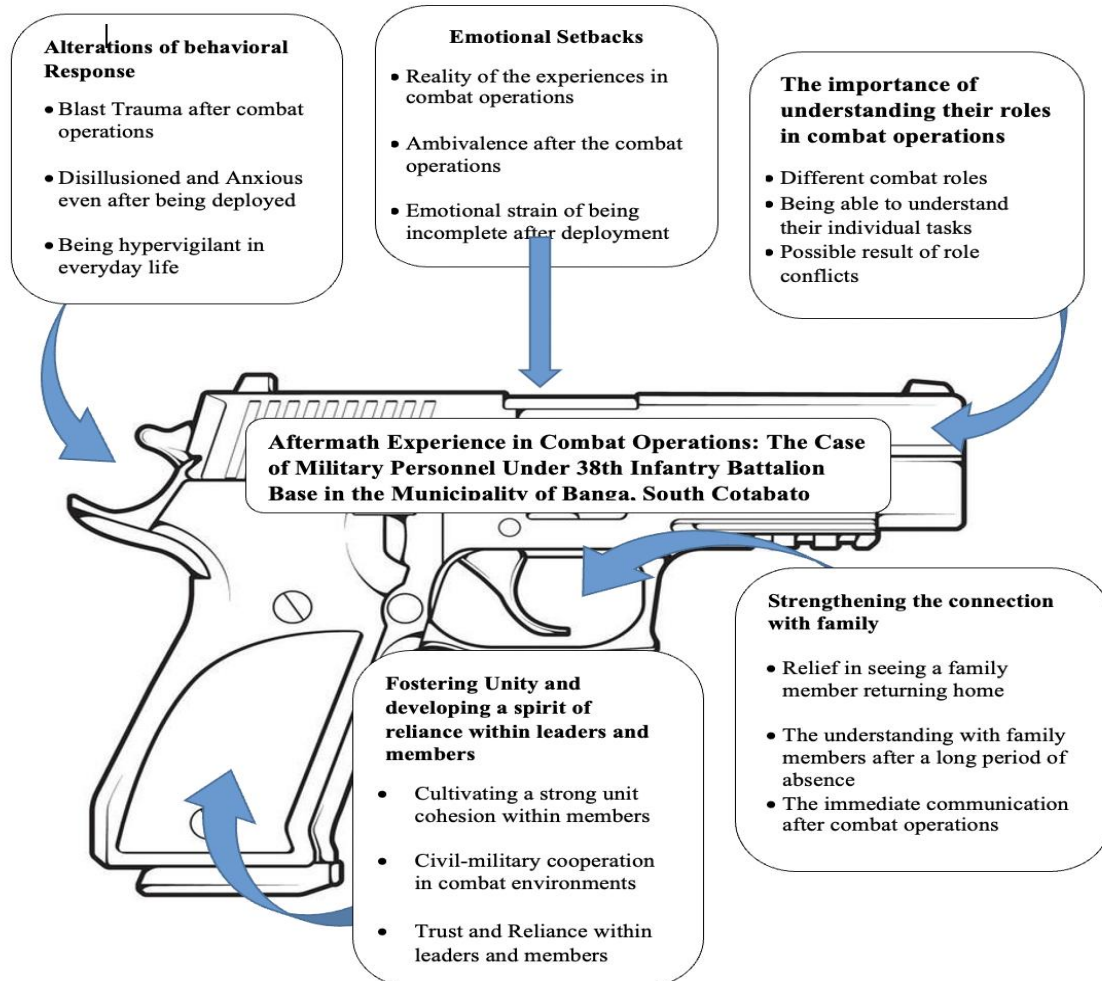
Figure 3. *Conceptual Model*

Figure 3. Formulated conceptual model on Aftermath Experience in Combat Operations: The Case of Military Personnel Under 38th Infantry Battalion Base in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato.

Figure 3. Formulated conceptual model on Aftermath Experience in Combat Operations: The Case of Military Personnel Under 38th Infantry Battalion Base in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato.

Based on the data gathered from the participants Frederico, Antonio and Jose, the emergent formulated conceptual model was clustered into 5 categories, showcasing highly similar and partly similar in their aftermath experience in combat operations.

The model's visual representation included an image of a gun, symbolizing its deep significance in their lives. For these individuals, the gun was more than just a weapon it was a crucial tool for survival, a source of empowerment, and a constant reminder of the dangers they faced in combat. It became an extension of their identity as soldiers, reflecting their roles as both protectors and, at times, aggressors. Beyond its practical function, the gun carried emotional and psychological weight, embodying both

security and trauma. It served as a tangible link to their combat experiences, encapsulating their struggles, fears, and the lasting impact of war on their lives.

Insights

The study on the "Aftermath Experience in Combat Operations: The Case of Military Personnel Under 38th Infantry Battalion Base in the Municipality of Banga, South Cotabato" revealed the lasting emotional and psychological effects of combat on soldiers. It showed that beyond physical injuries, soldiers deal with trauma, stress, and grief that stay with them long after they return home.

The study emphasize d that the recovery is not just about physical healing—it requires strong emotional support, including psychological counseling and guidance from experienced soldiers. Peer relationships are also key in helping soldiers cope.

A key takeaway from the study is the importance of systematic training and support systems in helping soldiers handle these intense challenges. The structured training soldiers receive does not just prepare them physically for combat, but also mentally and emotionally. The discipline they learn in training helps them stay focused and maintain safety, even when faced with unexpected situations.

Finally, the study highlighted the important role of family and community support in a soldier's healing process. Families provide the comfort and care needed for soldiers to reintegrate into civilian life and move forward from their traumatic experiences.

Implications

The study revealed that soldiers face a variety of challenges like physical exhaustion, emotional stress, and mental trauma as part of their military duties. These challenges affect soldiers in many ways, from the strain of long, grueling missions to the deep emotional toll of losing fellow soldiers. The mental and emotional pressure from these experiences can sometimes lead to struggles like anger, depression, or trauma, especially when soldiers witness violence or lose comrades. Despite all these challenges, the study showed how soldiers rely on strong bonds with their fellow service members, their family and rigorous training to stay focused, strong, and disciplined.

The study also highlighted the trauma soldiers endure, especially when facing life-threatening situations such as explosions or combat injuries. These experiences can leave deep emotional scars, potentially leading to anxiety, fear, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, the study found that soldiers often manage their trauma by employing various coping strategies, including maintaining focus on their duties, drawing strength from their military mindset, and finding solace in the camaraderie of their fellow soldiers. While the hardships of war are inevitable, these strategies help them maintain emotional resilience and continue performing their duties.

In conclusion, the research suggested that to help soldiers cope with the mental and emotional stresses of their job, a well-rounded approach is needed. This includes not only rigorous training to prepare them for the physical demands of combat, but also strong emotional and psychological support systems. These systems, which involve mentorship, counseling, family support, and faith, help soldiers manage stress, prevent mental health issues, and remain strong through the toughest times. By providing this kind of comprehensive support, soldiers are better able to perform their duties while

maintaining their mental and emotional health. Ultimately, this approach helps not just the soldiers individually but also strengthens the overall effectiveness and success of their military unit.

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