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330 OLD NISKAYUNA ROAD
LATHAM, NEW YORK 12110



SAFETY MESSAGE 20-08

August Fatigue Management

FORT Polk, La. (Oct. 9, 2013) - It was day seven at the Joint Readiness Training Center and it showed on the faces of the young infantrymen. They were exposed to typical central Louisiana weather in November; the nights were cooler and often marked by heavy rains. The platoon sergeant worked hard to keep the troops motivated and moving under their combat loads. No one wanted to be cold or wet, so the rucks were especially heavy.

With ammo, rations and water, each Soldier carried more than 100 pounds of gear. After seven days of constant operations, the effects of that weight were evident. Even the fittest of the platoon were hollow-eyed with fatigue. Their reactions were slow and their minds fuzzy. They rucked up and moved on toward their next mission, an attack on a suspected strong point five clicks away. Less than 500 meters into the movement, the tired point man missed seeing movement ahead as he cleared the edge of a small grove. The opposing force ambushed the platoon. No one survived the notional mission.

The above story is a classic fatigue mishap. Fatigue is part of an infantryman's life in the field. Without rest or support, fatigue can reduce an effective unit to a leaderless gaggle even in the most benevolent terrain. With rough terrain and bad weather, the effects of fatigue multiply exponentially. The more hills you have to climb and the worse the weather, the faster you are going to tire. Physical training reduces that rate, but it does not eliminate it. On the other hand, carrying too much

weight accelerates exhaustion. This is common sense, right? Maybe so, but common sense does not always prevail.

Consider the risk-versus-gain aspects of combat loading your Soldiers. What are you risking when you configure your Soldiers for combat? The answer -- your mission and Soldiers. If Soldiers have their mission-essential equipment, they may be uncomfortable at times, but they will be able to sustain their combat effectiveness. If Soldiers are being overloaded and collapse from the weight of comfort items, they may not even reach the objective. By overloading Soldiers with comfort-related items, leaders are in effect expending them before they have the opportunity to achieve the mission.

Crew rest plans are a vital combat multiplier for military operations. If the Soldiers in your command are constantly fatigued and don't have time to re-energize, you run the risk of mission failure and casualties. In today's battlefield, the number of possible hazards is immense. It takes mental sharpness to detect all the hazards that the enemy has to throw at you and your Soldiers. A Soldier's state of mind is absolutely a big factor in successful missions and bringing everyone home safely. Decreased mental capacity due to fatigue causes stress and leads to distracted Soldiers.

It's important to recognize the potential for stress and fatigue in any event or situation:

- Physical stressors include external environmental conditions such as heat and noise, equipment weight and the terrain underfoot.
- Mental stressors involve information that places demands on either your thoughts or feelings.
- Combat stressors can be physical or mental and occur during the course of combat-related duties. These stressors can result from enemy action, your unit or your home life.

Stress is the way your body and mind counteract stressors:

- Positive stress helps you respond appropriately to normal stressors; some amount of stress is necessary to prompt effective responses.
- Too little stress may make you distracted, forgetful or cause you to fall asleep.
- Too much stress may make you focus on only one aspect of a task, neglecting the larger picture.
- Extreme stress may cause you to "freeze up" or become agitated and flee.
- Prolonged extreme stress can cause physical and mental disablement.

Physical fatigue results from:

- Hard or prolonged work
- Muscle tiredness
- Aerobic fatigue
- Sleep deprivation
- Physical illness
- Intense emotions, such as anxiety and fear

Mental fatigue results from:

- Prolonged mental effort on a specific task
- Emotions such as boredom or uncertainty

Battle fatigue/combat stress reaction is usually present at some level in all unit personnel in a theater of combat operations. Soldiers and leaders are responsible for

identifying personnel who require treatment for battle fatigue or combat stress reaction. Watch for stress indicators in your peers and encourage other Soldiers to self-report. The key element of complacency is your attitude.

Leaders and mission planners need to be completely in tune with the unit and Soldiers' operational tempo and make sure that the amount of fatigue and stress that the Soldiers are experiencing is taken into consideration for mission success. Remember, a fatigued Soldier is at increased risk of injury or death.

References and Links

- NYARNG 385-10: Army National Guard safety Program
<https://www.nationalguard.mil/Portals/31/Documents/ARNGpdfs/guardsafety/ARNG-Safety-Program.pdf>

To find previously published Safety Messages go to our NYARNG Safety Website:

<http://dmna.ny.gov/safety/>

New York Army National Guard Safety Office Points of Contact:

Safety and Occupational Health Manager:
Alicia Howard
alicia.l.howard.civ@mail.mil
(518) 786-6097

Safety Specialist:
Matthew Williams
matthew.s.williams117.mail@mail.mil
(518) 786-6040

M-Day Safety Specialists:
MSG Jerry Peace
jerry.l.peace.mail@mail.mil

M-Day Safety Specialists:
SFC Adama Ilboudo
adama.ilboudo.mail@mail.mil

Occupational Health Nurse:
Valerie Schwalbach
valerie.a.schwalbach.civ@mail.mil
(518) 786-4329

Safety Specialist:
Chuck Austin
charles.b.austin2.civ@mail.mil
(518) 786-6121

M-Day Safety Specialists:
CW3 David Morton
david.t.morton.civ@mail.mil