

**THE RETURNING MILITARY VETERAN  
IS YOUR ORGANIZATION READY?**

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

## **THE RETURNING MILITARY VETERAN IS YOUR ORGANIZATION READY?**

As increasing numbers of US military veterans return from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, law enforcement agencies throughout the nation are likely to face additional challenges as they encounter service members in their communities. Sometimes, these encounters can have deadly consequences. For instance, in January 2005, nineteen year old Andres Raya walked to a local convenience store in Ceres, California and asked the cashier to call the police for him. When the police arrived, Raya pulled out an assault rifle from beneath his trench coat and shot the two responding officers, one fatally, without provocation. Raya fled into the neighborhood telling some residents that they were “innocent civilians” and would not be harmed. Raya was killed in a shoot-out with additional officers who responded to the scene. Raya, a Lance Corporal on leave from the Camp Pendleton, California, reportedly spent seven months in Iraq as a motor transport operator and had told family members a month before the shooting that he didn’t want to return to Camp Pendleton or Iraq. (Murphy, 2005) Other such incidents have an added dimension to their tragedy.

In April 2006, twenty-six year old Christopher Sullivan was out celebrating his return home from Iraq when he put the muzzle of his pistol into the mouth of one of his close friends. Sullivan then pulled the trigger of the weapon, killing a high school classmate. (Bigham, 2009) In May 2008, a thirty-four year old Jeff Rand celebrated his birthday with his wife and friends. Rand, who was taking medication for a work-related injury, became heavily intoxicated as the night wore on. Later the next morning his wife found him to be unresponsive at their residence. He was transported to the hospital via ambulance and later pronounced dead. It was later learned that Rand had unintentionally overdosed on prescription medication. (Round table discussion

with Southern California police executives, personal communication, October 2, 2008) As tragic as all three incidents are because of the human toll, there is an added element to that of Sullivan and Rand; they were both California peace officers who had recently returned from military duty.

Sullivan had just graduated from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department academy before being deployed to Iraq for one year. Rand was a Southern California police officer and a decorated Marine Corps veteran who previously had served on President Clinton's Security Detail. He re-joined the Marine Corps as an active duty reserve after being hired as an officer. During the initial push into Iraq, the officer's unit earned a congressional commendation for bravery for acts of heroism he displayed after his unit found a cache of insurgent's weapons near an oil field. During his time in Iraq, he worked to rebuild the Iraqi police force. When he returned home and back to his agency, many fellow employees were uneasy being around him. They didn't know if the War had changed him or not. His department had never sent one of their own off to War.

Rand's agency is not alone. With estimations of the number of full-time law enforcement professionals belonging to these units comprising 10 percent or more, local police agencies must adequately prepare for the eventual return of the reservist law enforcement employee from their deployment and ensure that re-acclimation measures are in place that will benefit the employee, his or her co-workers and the community. To do less does a disservice to the department member, and to the community they serve.

### **Defining the problem**

Since October 2001, about 1.64 million U.S. troops have deployed as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF; Afghanistan) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF; Iraq). As of

November 2008, more than 120,000 members of the National Guard and Military Reserve units have been activated as part of the War effort. (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.) Roughly ten percent of these reservists are public safety professionals. (Ritchie & Curran, 2006)

Not only are a higher proportion of the armed forces being deployed, but deployments have been longer, redeployment to combat is common, and breaks between deployments have been infrequent. (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008, p. xix) At the same time, casualty rates of the killed or wounded are historically lower than in earlier prolonged wars, such as Vietnam and Korea. (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008, p. xix) Although the casualty rates of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars are significantly lower than in previous conflicts, a different type of casualty is beginning to emerge - invisible wounds, such as mental health problems and cognitive impairments resulting from deployments experiences.

Upward of 35 percent of returning troops may experience psychological issues and seek help for mental health problems through military programs. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008) Common factors leading to increased psychological stress in military personnel include roadside bombs, IEDs, suicide bombers, the handling of human remains, killing an enemy, seeing fellow soldiers and friends dead or injured, and the helplessness of not being able to stop violent situations. (Tanielian & Jaycox, p. 5) The most common condition is post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder that can develop after direct or indirect exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened; major depression; and generalized anxiety. (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008, p. 3) Unlike other physical wounds of war, these conditions usually remain invisible to other service members, to family members, and to society in general. PTSD affects mood, thoughts and behavior; yet these wounds often go unrecognized and unacknowledged. (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008, p. xx)

More than 26% of soldiers who have experienced combat overseas suffer from the effects of PTSD. (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008, p. 3) In 2006, 99 Army soldiers committed suicide, the highest rate in 26 years. (Staff, 2008) Failed relationships, legal and financial trouble and job stress were keys factors that motivated the soldiers to end their lives. Research conducted by the Veteran's Administration that found that more than half of the veterans who committed suicide after returning home from the War were members of the National Guard or the Reserves. "I know members of our Guard and Reserves oftentimes don't think of themselves as veterans, they see themselves as going back to their same jobs; they sort of disassociate themselves with the VA system," says Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., a member of the Senate Veterans Affairs committee. (Hefling, 2008)

Within the next five years, many of the U.S. military service members and reservist personnel who have helped defend our country against terrorism abroad will complete their tours of duty and return home to their communities, families and loved ones. Since at least 26 percent of these returning military personnel will experience mental health issues such as PTSD, it is safe to assume that it will be difficult for them to assimilate back into society. In addition, they may come to the attention of law enforcement because of criminal activity, homelessness, substance abuse or domestic violence situations. But what about the law enforcement professionals who serve our country overseas?

### **Defining the Law Enforcement Response**

Law enforcement executives must prepare themselves for the eventual return of their deployed personnel from Iraq and Afghanistan back to the communities they serve. Proper preparation will equip the agency with the tools and resources to ensure that the returning veteran is welcomed and re-acclimated to their agency with open arms, and that other agency

personnel are aware of what to expect during the transition period. One might ask, though, what the right response might be. Fortunately, there are programs and services in place at some agencies that can serve as models to all others.

### **The Military Liaison Officer Program**

Several Southern California law enforcement agencies have established unique programs to aid their own personnel who have been subject to military activation. Created in 2003, the Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) Military Liaison (MLO) program was designed to create a central point of contact to handle the many concerns and inquiries from deployed officer's families. The program has evolved to include assisting officers before, during and after their leave with any of their needs; including benefits, promotions and transfers. The department has also instituted a reintegration program to provide returning personnel re-training, physical and mental health assessments and background checks. (Los Angeles Police Department, n.d.) (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2008, p. 21) About 500 of LAPD's 9500 officers have been deployed to the War effort and engaged the MLO program since its inception. "The goal of the program is to ensure the veteran remains part of the LAPD family during their deployment and to look out for their mental health," according to LAPD Captain Duane Hayakawa, who oversaw the program from 2004 to 2008. The program is staffed with two full time MLOs at a cost (salaries, benefits and other overhead) of about \$300,000 per year. (D. Hayakawa, personal communication, February 25, 2009)

### **The Military Activation Committee**

In 2001, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) implemented a Military Activation Committee (MAC) to address the needs of military reservists who were called to active duty. (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2008,

p. 22) Since 2002, the department has seen about 500 of its 10,000 sworn personnel activated to military deployment. The committee worked with Dr. Audrey Honig, the department's chief psychologist, to establish the criteria for the reintegration of military veterans back to law enforcement duty.

The four day reintegration program that was developed by the MAC includes a welcoming from the unit commander, updates on department policy and procedure, a meeting with a department psychologist, firearms qualification and a tactical refresher course. (4 critical days: LASD's transition from foreign battlefield to domestic streets, 2008) Each unit within the LASD is staffed with a Military Liaison Officer (there are 80 MLOs department-wide) who is responsible for assisting their unit commander and troubleshooting issues and providing advice and counseling to the returning veteran. The LASD has also established a "Vets for Vets" peer support program to provide long term mentorship, guidance, assistance and peer support for returning veterans within the department. (L. Castro, personal communication, February 27, 2009) "If you are paying attention to the veterans and communicating, you stand a better chance of achieving success," according to LASD Commander Lynda Castro, who had led the MAC since 2003. "Training and dialogue are key attributes of the program so that other department personnel don't think that the returning veterans have been off on a paid vacation," says Castro.

### **The Santa Monica Experience**

For smaller and moderate size agencies, there are other alternatives to consider. The Santa Monica Police Department (SMPD) has had six of their 200 officers experience military deployments since the beginning of the Gulf War in 2001. They created an informal program to address returning veterans. Six sworn personnel of the department's 200 officers have experienced military deployments since the beginning of the War. According to SMPD Deputy

Chief of Police Phil Sanchez, returning employees generally have a “celebrity status” with co-workers during the first few days of their return to work which has helped ease their transition process (P. Sanchez, personal communication, February 24, 2009) Santa Monica’s seven to ten day re-acclimation period includes a welcome home meeting between the returning employee and members of command staff, a department orientation, a technology update and the opportunity for the employee to temporarily work with a partner officer. Typically speaking, employees are back on their own within one month of their return to the department. “We have been able to completely submerge our returning employees back into the police culture without any negative repercussions,” says Sanchez. Sanchez would like to see the program become formalized in the future. “It should become transparent and move beyond our current administration. Some veterans may need more or less time to re-acclimate. Formalizing the program will allow that to occur.” (P. Sanchez, personal communication, February 24, 2009)

Police Officer Douglas Woodhams has experienced Santa Monica Police Department’s informal program first hand. A police officer since 2002, Woodhams is also a United States Marine Corps Major. In March 2009, Woodhams will begin preparing for his third military deployment to Iraq since being hired by the City. Woodhams says that how well the returning veteran is received by the law enforcement agency has an immense value and help underscore the veteran’s belief that their military service was “morally right.” The moral support and friendly atmosphere the Department offered him upon the return from his two previous deployments definitely aided his transition process. (D. Woodhams, personal communication, February 24, 2009)

Each of the highlighted models has been deemed a success for the organizations that have created them. The size of the agency and the number of personnel experiencing military

deployment should dictate the type and depth of reservist re-acclimation program to be implemented. It is important that law enforcement executives realize the role such programs will have in maintaining healthy law enforcement agencies into the future.

### **A Recommended Solution**

Law enforcement organizations, especially those that may hire or currently employ personnel who are military reservists should consider the adoption of a formalized plan to facilitate the smooth transition of an employee during wartime deployment to and from the department. Four important attributes of this plan are (1) the creation of a Military Liaison Officer position within the organization; (2) the provision of education to department personnel about the pre and post deployment process; (3) outreach to the deployed employee and their family; and (4) the implementation of a standardized re-acclimation process for returning personnel.

**Military Liaison Officer:** The Los Angeles Police and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Departments have achieved great success in developing and implementing the MLO position in their agencies. As was previously mentioned by LAPD Captain Hayakawa, the position definitely helps their agency to maintain awareness of and keep close contact with their deployed personnel.

Depending on the size of the agency and the number of personnel who experience military deployments, this position may be a full-time or ancillary role. Smaller agencies may even consider staffing the MLO position with a civilian in a full or part time capacity depending on the needs of the organization and their budgetary constraints. The individual chosen to fill this position should be a rational, mature individual who is highly respected within the organization. Ideally, the selected officer should be a military veteran who is familiar with military protocol

and procedure. The MLO will serve as the communication facilitator between the deployed employee and the organization. He or she will provide assistance, counseling and mentorship to the affected employee before, during and after their deployment. The MLO may also function as the liaison between the agency and representatives from the various branches of the U.S. armed forces.

Department Education: Providing education to department personnel about what they should expect before, during and after an employee's deployment and about post traumatic stress disorder will reduce misconceptions and give employees a broad understanding of agency protocols, the issue of PTSD in the military and how the condition affects veterans, friends and family members. Goals of the training should be to introduce department members to the warning signs of PTSD and the available treatment options and to reduce the possibility that fellow employees will be fearful of or non-communicative with veterans who return to the workplace. According to SMPD Officer Woodhams, "It is critical to get the employee plugged back into the department and (providing) PTSD training for all department personnel is essential" to accomplish this.

Employee Outreach: Organizations should consider providing time for the employee to prepare for their military activation. A department-sponsored celebration just prior to the employee's departure will help reassure the employee that the agency is looking forward to and anticipating their return to work. During the deployment, the designated members of the department (such as the MLO) should maintain close contact with family members of the deployed veteran to determine if there are needs that the department can assist with. The use of technology as well as traditional mail to establish communication with the veteran and to provide agency news and updates should be a frequent occurrence. Another department-sponsored

celebration upon the veteran's return to work will highlight the employee's value and importance to the organization. It will also reduce the tendency for the employee to dwell on the negative personal opinions of his or her military service that some co-workers may have. According to Officer Woodhams, the workplace environment the veteran returns to will play an important part on how he or she views their military service in the future and their psychological ability to readjust to the workplace.

Re-acclimation Process: Undoubtedly, the most important aspect of any law enforcement program to aid and assist returning law enforcement veterans is the development and implementation of a re-acclimation program. Since more than one in four returning veterans will experience PTSD or other mental health issues, it is possible that a portion of returning law enforcement veterans will fall into this category. The overall purpose of the re-acclimation process is to provide a transparent process and expectations to the veteran that clearly define what will occur when they return to work.

The LASD's four-day reintegration plan is an excellent example of what law enforcement agencies can do to ensure that returning veterans are provided with the essential information and training necessary to better equip the veteran for his or her return to duty and limit agency liability. The program provides the opportunity for the employee to (1) consult with the personnel department regarding payroll and benefit needs; (2) become reacquainted with department policy and procedure, including updates that may have occurred during their absence; (3) participate in department firearms qualification exercises; (4) obtain tactical training; (5) become reacquainted with the unit commander and assigned MLO and (6) consult with a department psychologist.

A key component of the LASD's reintegration plan is their mandatory requirement that the veteran meet with a department psychologist. Though not a fitness for duty examination, it is an opportunity for the employee to be made aware of the mental health services that are available to them and their families and to inform them of some of the common reactions they may experience in the coming months.

### **Conclusion**

Establishing a veteran's program incorporating each of the four recommended services is beneficial for a number of reasons. It will provide returning veterans and their families the assistance and support they need. Department personnel will be better prepared to accept returning employees who have endured a War deployment. The returning employee will experience a defined re-acclimation process to ensure his or her successful return to work and, finally, it could open the lines of communication between the law enforcement agency and representatives from the various branches of the U.S. military.

Our returning law enforcement veterans have done what has been asked of them. They have served our country served our country honorably and in a heroic fashion. We owe it to them to proactively take care of their needs on a consistent basis upon their return to their families and their agencies. Each of us has the honor of veterans serving in our ranks. Let's ensure they have the support they need to make military service all it can be for the veteran and the department they serve. Doing so will improve the health and welfare of the law enforcement organization and will better prepare the agency if the unfortunate need for US military action occurs elsewhere in the world in the coming years.

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