THE

Tactical Edge®

SWAT | CNT | PATROL | COMMAND | CANINE | TEMS | FIRE/EMS

FALL 2024

Inside this Issue

P. 60

Stissing Mountain Junior/Senior High School Hostage-Taking

LESSONS LEARNED FROM

THE DEBRIEF

BY JON BECKER

STRESS INOCULATION: A KEY TO OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

In episode 16 of The Debrief, CATO President Brent Stratton and I had the honor of interviewing retired Army MSgt. Earl Plumlee, a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. In pertinent part, the citation for his Medal of Honor states:

"Sergeant Plumlee instantly responded to an enemy attack on Forward Operating Base Ghazni — Ghazni Province, Afghanistan — that began with an explosion that tore a 60-foot breach in the base's perimeter wall. Ten insurgents wearing Afghan National Army uniforms and suicide vests poured through the breach. Sergeant Plumlee and five others mounted two vehicles and raced toward the explosion. When his vehicle was engaged by enemy fire, Sergeant Plumlee reacted instinctively, using his body to shield the driver prior to exiting the vehicle and engaging an enemy insurgent 15 meters to the vehicle's right with his pistol. Without cover and in complete disregard for his own safety, he advanced on the enemy, engaging multiple insurgents with only his pistol. Upon reaching cover, he killed two insurgents — one with a grenade and the other by detonating the insurgent's suicide vest using precision sniper fire. Again, disregarding his own safety, Sergeant Plumlee advanced alone against the enemy, engaging several insurgents at close range, including one whose suicide vest exploded a mere seven meters from his position. Under intense enemy fire, Sergeant Plumlee temporarily withdrew to cover, where he joined up with another soldier and, together, they mounted another counterattack. Under fierce enemy fire, Sergeant Plumlee again moved from cover and attacked the enemy forces, advancing within seven meters of a previously wounded insurgent who detonated his suicide vest, blowing Sergeant Plumlee back against a nearby wall. Sergeant Plumlee, ignoring his injuries, quickly regained his faculties and reengaged the enemy forces. Intense enemy fire once again forced the two soldiers to temporarily withdraw. Undeterred, Sergeant Plumlee joined a small group of American and Polish soldiers, who moved from cover to once again counterattack the infiltrators. As the force advanced, Sergeant Plumlee engaged an insurgent to his front left. He then swung around and engaged another insurgent who charged the group from the rear. The insurgent detonated his suicide vest, mortally wounding a U.S. soldier. Sergeant Plumlee, again, with complete disregard for his own safety, ran to the wounded soldier, carried him to safety, and rendered first aid. He then methodically cleared the area, remained in a security posture, and continued to scan for any remaining threats."

To say the least, Plumlee's actions that day were exceptional. The entire story, if written as a movie script, would likely be turned away by Hollywood as unrealistic. Plumlee's account of the entire event is a riveting tale of running

out of ammo, hand grenades landing on him, suicide vests being detonated, being blown up repeatedly, rebuilding weapons on the fly and still effectively fighting attackers. Perhaps the most striking thing about the entire story is the amazing calm, focus and resolve shown by Plumlee under such extreme circumstances.

The question one must ask is why. Why do some people perform like this while others collapse under pressure? Why do some people seem to thrive in chaos while others lock up or go into meltdown? While there are certainly some people who are better equipped for these types of situations, the recurring explanation for optimal performance from guests on The Debrief is always the same: stress inoculation training.

MSgt. Earl Plumlee (ret.)

Dr. Brittany Loney

What is stress inoculation?

Performance in challenging environments is a complicated thing. To reach optimal performance, both our physical and mental capabilities need to function at their highest levels and remain focused on the task at hand despite fear, confusion and conflicting priorities. Optimal performance comes from a physically calm state and a focused mind that is gathering and sorting the most important data to create situational awareness and then make rapid decisions.

When we are faced with circumstances that are novel, complex, unfamiliar or frightening, it is easy for us to become cognitively overwhelmed and unable to perform. When overwhelmed by the stress of an event, our cognitive processing becomes fragmented and our decision-making degrades. We also become physiologically over-modulated and filled with adrenaline, our breathing and heart rate accelerate, and we tend to miss crucial information. We can even become fixated on unimportant information or tasks and lose orientation. Much like a computer that is running out of RAM and stuck on the spinning hourglass or wheel icon, when we are overwhelmed, we struggle to perform anywhere near our best.

In Episode 42, I interviewed Dr. Brittany Loney, founder of Elite Cognition. Loney is a performance psychologist who works with some of the world's most elite tactical units, athletes and corporate executives. Her job is to help teams reach their optimal levels of performance by adjusting the way they train, the way they use their brains, the way they communicate, the way they live and even the way they work as a unit. One of the tools she uses to accomplish this is stress inoculation.

The idea behind stress inoculation is that by pre-exposing individuals to the stressors they are likely to encounter operationally, we can build their capacity to handle those stressors, rapidly process information, self-regulate their physical/emotional state and then respond accordingly to the threats presented. Loney describes stress inoculation as a systematic and progressive exposure to stressors that individuals are likely to encounter in their operational environments for the purpose of building tolerance and adaptability to that stress.

Much like strength training, the idea is that gradually increasing the amount of stress someone is exposed to builds their resistance to that level of stress, making it less novel, less frightening, and therefore reducing the unnecessary cognitive load to cope with it. This allows the brain to focus on higher processing skills and better decision-making, allowing better performance. This is especially true in complex high-threat environments like HRT or CQB/CQC. Put another way, the more available cognitive capacity we have, the better we are able to adapt to the dynamic situation enabling us to achieve optimal performance. If our brains are mired in stress, confusion and anxiety, we make it harder for ourselves to perform well. The purpose of stress inoculation training is to make trainees accustomed to the challenges posed by common tasks in high-stress environments and teach them how to absorb the stress and focus on the most critical tasks.

Stress inoculation and similar methods of training have been a frequent topic on The Debrief. Performance experts on the show like Dr. Kelly Starrett, Dr. Dan Dworkis, and Loney all have discussed the science and practice of effective training methods, while Tier 1 operators like Rich Diviney, Pete Blaber and Andy Stumpf have discussed the practical effects of building stress inoculation into training to improve performance. The consensus of these opinions has been three

areas of best practices for improving stress response: building strong basic skills, utilizing the correct types of stressors, and building stress tolerance slowly and progressively.

The old saying that practice makes perfect is only true when it is properly executed. Sacrificing precision for speed or accelerating training efforts before underlying skills are built will not be effective.

Drill the skills – A lot!

The first best practice is to focus on perfecting the basic skills needed for operations in your team prior to employing large amounts of stress training. The basic skills like shooting, reloading, clearing malfunctions, weapon transitions and team movement must become almost automatic for the team to achieve high levels of performance. Implementing significant stress training prior to building a solid foundation is not likely to be successful.

In my interview with Plumlee, he attributed a large part of his surviving the event to his team spending so much time focusing on their basic skills. He described how he paid almost no attention to basic operations like reloading, clearing malfunctions, or even fixing a broken weapon during his firefight. This, in turn, freed his mind to focus on solving the more complex problems as the situation unfolded. In fact, Plumlee described noticing his brass ejecting from his gun at one point and immediately coming to the realization that he had become too "front sight focused" and needed to open up his field of vision.

Retired Delta CSM Tom Satterly discussed how the unit completely rebuilds each new operator's shooting skills in a "crawl, walk and run" manner to make these skills second nature and intuitive. The idea that a tier one unit would dedicate the time it takes to "rebuild" shooting skills for already talented shooters is a clear indication of the heavy emphasis placed on "basic skills" by high-performing units. When looked at as a foundation for stress resistance, this emphasis makes a great deal of sense. Second-nature shooting skills allow the operator to focus on more important things in high-stress situations and prevent becoming overloaded while maintaining mental clarity.

To further ensure effective self-control and stress modulation, Loney recommends integrating the use of self-regulation techniques (e.g., breath control) within one's tactical and technical skill training as the concurrent training builds a mental blueprint of successful skill execution with embedded self-regulation. This ensures self-regulation becomes as automatic as skill execution under high stress.

It is important however that these skills are built deliberately, precisely and trained consistently to ingrain them deeply and make them easy to access in an operational environment. The old saying that practice makes perfect is only true when it is properly executed. Sacrificing precision for speed or accelerating training efforts before underlying skills are built will not be effective. In other words, take the time to build the base level skills and then begin to apply stressors to challenge limits.

Use the right stressors

It is critical that stress induction be rooted in realistic and relevant stressors. Loney emphasizes that training should contain high levels of realism to be effective and transferrable to real-world operations. She believes that it is important that the stressors applied in training be relevant to the future operating environment. Different stressors have different effects, and it is important to match the correct stressor to the desired training effect. For example, while yelling and screaming at trainees is a common approach that may create stress, it may not create transferrable inoculation if they are unlikely to encounter yelling in their operational environment. However, if yelling is relevant to future operating environments, then integrating this stressor in training would be effective. Loney prefers physical and cognitive stressors, which are likely to be encountered in the real world. Examples may include hard physical exertion, time compression, sensory overload, moral dilemmas and

decision-making problems. Former Delta Commander Pete Blaber emphasizes how the use of physical exhaustion can simulate the stress experienced in combat. Blaber's former unit often has trainees run hard in their gear before participating in stress shoots. High heart rate, rapid breathing and muscle failure all are likely occurrences in a high threat environment. As a result, using them as training stimulus will mimic the physical and mental fatigue encountered in real combat situations.

It is also a good idea to include stressors that are cognitive and emotional and not just physical. Unexpectedly changing variables like room layout, varying the number of suspects, adding medical casualties, putting children into a problem, or having opponents perform in unexpected ways all force cognitive and self-regulatory skills out of their normal box. Moreover, adding physical elements like tear gas, smoke, water, sounds of people screaming, loud noises, etc. all increase the amount of chaos and distraction which can also magnify the training effect. Some elite units even add fear of physical pain to training by using shock vests, wearing limited protection for sims training, or inflicting physical punishments (like PT) when performance doesn't meet standards. Physical pain (or more specifically the fear of pain) can create pressure as well as physical and mental anxiety, which heightens cognitive training load and augments adaptation.

Blaber and Plumlee both emphasized that the training environment also must remain novel for trainees. Applying the same stress repeatedly will quickly stop having the desired effect. Like any exercise program, stress inoculation must be progressive and variable to have maximum effect. The idea is to keep the trainees on their heels and force their brains to overcome new and novel stressors. Simply put, keep it evolving and changing, but always make it realistic to the operational environment.

The dose makes the medicine (or the poison)

Like any training tool, stress must be used in moderation and increased progressively. Like strength training, if the load from stress inoculation is too little it will not be effective. Yet, if it is significantly overdosed, it will also be ineffective and may actually be harmful. A slow, deliberate and progressive approach is what is recommended. Starting with a small number of stressors and a lower intensity level and then gradually increasing both the number of stressors and the complexity of problems is essential for adaptation.

The goal is to trigger an adaptive response, not to overwhelm the trainees. If training overwhelms the trainees, results in repeated training failures, or is used too frequently, it can cause the opposite of inoculation; it can instill fear and anxiety around future operations and build a training scar that will be difficult to overcome. Much like a strength training program, build stress slowly to avoid causing injury.

Managing the "stress reservoir"

One final concept that is crucial to recognize is that our stress resistance is a fluid thing that is impacted by factors beyond just the stress of the event itself. One's life circumstances, physical health, fatigue level, state of recovery, etc., all have a profound impact on how we perform on any given day. Loney describes this as our "stress reservoir." Simply put, the deeper and fuller our reservoir, the better we can absorb individual events.

The idea behind stress inoculation training is to increase the depth of this reservoir. However, it is important to understand that having a deeper reservoir is useless if the reservoir is always empty. Optimal performance requires not just the application of stress but the recovery from stress and making choices that help keep our stress reservoirs close to full. Sleeping well, eating well, being physically fit and having a healthy home life all help to facilitate a better stress response and better operational performance. Start with a shallow or empty reservoir, and the stress of individual events becomes more difficult to navigate successfully. Start with a deep and full reservoir and optimal performance is readily available.

Conclusion

Every tactical operator wishes to have the skills and capabilities to perform the way Earl Plumlee did. The performance of elite units is not just possessing elite-level skills but being able to leverage those skills when they are required. In many ways, the ability to cognitively adapt to any situation and effectively operate despite danger is the holy grail of tactical training. Stress inoculation training is a key component to optimal performance and must be a part of any unit's training regimen. However, it is clear from The Debrief's guests that this stress must be the right type, applied in the right dose, and must be built on a foundation of strong basic skills to be effective.

About the author

Jon Becker is the founder/CEO of Aardvark Tactical and host of The Debrief with Jon Becker, a long-format podcast that focuses on tactical leadership. He is also an attorney admitted for practice in California. He can be reached at jbecker@aardvarktactical.com

The author acknowledges Dr. Brittany Loney for her invaluable guidance with this article.

Optimal performance requires not just the application of stress but the recovery from stress and making choices that help keep our stress reservoirs close to full.