

Coming down off the high: Firefighters experience of readjustment following deployment

Alina Holgate and Maria Di Pietro analyse the psychological experiences of volunteer firefighters

Abstract

The Victoria, Australia 2006/2007 fire season was amongst the worst on record and involved the deployment of thousands of firefighters from multiple government agencies from across the State. Little research has been conducted into the typical readjustment processes of firefighters following return from deployment. There has also been little research into the emotional rewards that firefighters may experience during deployment. Sixty-six firefighting staff from an emergency response agency were interviewed about their experiences of readjustment and the subjective rewards of their tour and interview responses were content analysed using a grounded theory approach. Firefighters cited a feeling of achievement and of having made a meaningful contribution, as well as a sense of community and camaraderie, as rewards of their involvement in the firefight. Challenges to reintegration following deployment were: "coming down off the high"; feeling disoriented and detached; being cognitively preoccupied with the fires and needing to "offload". This paper argues that the typical experience of non-clinical emergency service workers: a) involves substantial emotional rewards and b) follows a typical pattern of readjustment that may present challenges to the workers reintegration into their normal life. Suggestions are made as to how managers may better assist firefighting staff to reintegrate to their normal work role following deployment to the fireground.

Introduction

The Victoria, Australia 2006/2007 fire season was amongst the worst on record. Over a million hectares were burnt and fireground staff worked day and night as more wildfires started — mostly due to lightning strikes. Approximately 3,000 people were involved in the firefight Statewide. This included both volunteer firefighters and paid firefighters from the Country Fire Authority (CFA), The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and Parks Victoria (PV), who were deployed from their normal duties to contribute to the firefight. These people typically did a rotating number of tours of duty on the fireground before returning to their normal work duties.

Much previous research has explored psychological readjustment after return from deployment to emergency work (Moran, 1998; Wagner, 2005). This research has mainly focussed on the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder or critical incident stress as psychological sequelae of involvement in emergency work. Most emergency service agencies have set up some form of debriefing mechanism (whether chaplaincy, peer support, formal critical incident stress debriefing, etc.) to address the needs of workers whose emotional state may have been disrupted following their deployment. The efficacy of such debriefing has been questioned (see Devilly and Cotton, 2003, McNally, Bryant and Ehlers, 2003, Devilly and Cotton, 2004, Devilly, Gist & Cotton, 2006, for extensive reviews of the literature).

While there is an extensive body of research on possible pathological reactions to emergency service events there has been no reported research (as far as these authors are aware) into the normal processes of readjustment that ordinary fireground staff may face, other than research into the fatigue or work stress typically associated with emergency service activities (Takeyama et al, 2005). Cowlshaw and McLennan's (2006) review of the limited literature on the impact of fire service on families of volunteer firefighters

makes clear that firefighters are typically exposed to appalling working conditions and considerable work stress which may be carried over into the home and affect family functioning. Regehr, Dimitropoulos, Bright, George, and Henderson (2005) found that firefighters reported being disengaged and emotionally distant from family following deployment. Cowlshaw and McLennan (2006) point out that social withdrawal is a relatively common response to stress (Repetti, 1992) and Regehr (2005) found that the spouses of paramedics noticed their partner's tendency to become emotionally withdrawn following stressful deployments. Roberts and Levinson (2001) found that exhaustion and work stress contributed to marital tension among police officers.

Regardless of whether fireground staff are traumatized by their emergency service experiences there is no doubt that deployment on a fireground tour is disruptive of a workers ordinary routine and functioning. An aim of the current research was to investigate the typical readjustment processes following a fireground tour among a non-clinical sample of fireground staff.

While there has been much research into the emotional costs of emergency service work, there has been little research focussing on the benefits of this work (Moran, 1998). Hetherington (1993) found that emergency medical personnel reported that their major sources of job satisfaction were: working as part of a team; use of skills; and a feeling of competency and challenge within the job. This is consistent with McLennan and Birch's (2007) findings that CFA volunteers report gaining considerable benefits from their involvement in firefighting, including contributing to the protection of the community, learning new skills and feeling like a valuable member of the community. Moran and Colless (1995) identified four dimensions of positive reactions following emergency service: exhilaration; sense of occupational achievement, enhanced appreciation of life and colleagues and a sense of control. Mouthaan, Euwema and Weerts (2005) found that among UN peacekeepers one of most commonly cited rewards of service was the social bonding that occurred during deployment which lead to these workers seeing themselves as a "band of brothers" (p.111). Research has suggested that firefighters are "a healthy group overall" (Harris, Baloglu and Stacks, 2002, p. 233) in terms of psychological resilience and positive world view. A further aim of the research was to investigate the subjective rewards of participation in fireground tours.

Participants

A total of 66 fireground staff employed by an emergency response agency (39 males and 27 females) were interviewed. Age of participants was not recorded but ages were judged to range from 20-60 with most participants being in the 30-50 age group. Participants



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Interviewers said the rewards of firefighting are a sense of community and camaradiere.

had served various roles on the fireground: 13 (20%) had served as general firefighters; 6 (9%) had worked in the staging area; 35 (53%) had worked in the Incident Management Team and 12 (18%) had worked in the fire recovery effort.

Method

Due to the exploratory nature of the research a qualitative methodology was employed. Participants were asked to respond to a number of open-ended questions about their emotional and physical reactions following their deployment to the fireground, e.g. how was your emotional state? how were your fatigue levels? did you have any general problems on your tour that made things difficult?

Procedure

Forty participants were interviewed face-to-face at regional offices and 26 were interviewed by phone. Face-to-face interviews were tape recorded with permission of the participants and notes were taken of phone interviews. The data were gathered as part of an audit into staff well being. All participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous and confidential. Participants represented a range of regional offices across the State. A grounded theory approach was used in content analysing data (Hanley-Maxwell, Al Hano and Skivington, 2007).

Results

Emotional benefits of deployment

A feeling of achievement and meaningful contribution

Fireground staff reported obtaining a sense of personal achievement and mastery in their role. They felt that they had been able to make a meaningful contribution during a time of high need.

One (male) said: "I see myself as a true 'public servant' – my attitude is 'what more can I do to help the community?' Fight the fires." Another (female) commented: "It was a very positive and fulfilling experience because of the job I was doing. I really felt I was helping." Another (male) commented: "The days are long but they've got to be. You kind of get a bit proprietorial over the fires."

A feeling of camaraderie and community

Fireground staff were also rewarded by the feeling of camaraderie and of community spirit during the firefight. One (female) reported: "It was a very positive experience. You feel very useful. The atmosphere is really good. Everyone pulls together." Another (female) commented: "It was a positive experience. We had the same group and manager on all deployments – there's lots of camaraderie." Another (male) commented: "I was inspired by the way some people operated [on the fireground]." Another (male) said: "I was with people with an extraordinary set of skills." Another (male) reported: "I was really well mentored by a more experienced offsider. It was a great experience."

Challenges to reintegration

Coming down off the high

Despite the positivity of their experience fireground staff reported experiencing difficulties with reintegration after their tour. One (male) said: "Good experience but had to come down off the high. While at the fires, there's no barriers to getting things done, plenty of resources. Very different to the world in the office." One (female) who was a novice to the fireground reported: "I came home on a high."

Fireground staff reported being totally absorbed during their tour. One (female) said: "Coming down off the high, it's all 'fire'. There's no outside world while on deployment." This experience was common regardless of fireground role. As one (female) commented: "Coming down off the high was tricky, especially for me in my role. I was shooting [badly burned] animals everyday and would sometimes wonder 'did we have to shoot that animal?'" Another (male) reported: "When you're on the longer shifts it was a bit harder to 'come down off the high' because it's so go, go, go." Another

(female) commented: "I talked in my sleep about the accommodation at the fires. I've never done this before. It's hard to come down off the high."

Disorientation, detachment and preoccupation with the fire.

Firefighters reported feeling disoriented and detached following their tour. One (male) said: "I was walking around in a daze, not concentrating." Another (male) reported: "I was less focussed, had difficulty sleeping... irritable at home. My wife noticed I didn't seem present." Another (female) reported: "You tend to be pretty out of it for the whole week and then you start to get back on track."

Firefighters reported being preoccupied with the fires. One (male) said: "I had a bit of difficulty re-focussing on my normal job. I was still thinking about the fires. It takes some time to wean off the fires. It's difficult to apply yourself to mundane jobs." Another (male) commented: "Someone in a campaign [fire], it takes weeks for people to fully recover. It's almost like you need to be reprogrammed." The intensity of their experience lead to this preoccupation persisting over a considerable period of time. One (male) commented: "I look at guys who were at the 2003 fires and they seem not to be over it. You can see they're somehow still engaged in it. I'm not saying it's PTSD, but I do know that every time you get a few of them together, all they do is talk about the 2003 fires."

A need to "off load".

The intensity of their experience and preoccupation lead to a need to "offload" their experience. As one female reported: "I found I was talking about it a lot." Another (male) commented: "When I returned my manager noticed changes [in me] but probably didn't know exactly how to deal with it." For some the interview process served as an opportunity to "offload". One (female) participant said: "I've very much enjoyed being able to discuss all this [in interview] and have someone listen."

No participants reported a need for counselling, however. As one (male) commented: "Counselling is not the most effective way [to debrief]. More effective would be to utilize the older blokes who have the experience as peer support."

Patterns of readjustment

Readjustment following deployment appeared to follow a typical pattern.

1. Immediately upon return from deployment fireground staff reported extreme physical exhaustion and a need to catch up on sleep. Most needed at least 2 days of rest immediately following deployment.

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Fireground staff reported experiencing difficulties in reintegration after their tour.

This process was often complicated by a feeling of being on an adrenalin high.

2. A sense of detachment from others, preoccupation with the fires and a feeling of disconnection from “normal” life. They reported feeling “not there”.
3. Gradual reconnection with work and family as the effects of fatigue wore off. Most participants reported that it took them at least a week to feel re-involved in their everyday lives.

One manager (male) summed up the situation: “I notice subtle changes in people returning from the fires. These changes are so subtle it seems the person themselves seems not to notice, but I can see them—things like not being focussed, a need to connect with others who’ve been to fires, an unsettled feeling and looking tired. As a manager I’d like to learn how to address this and manage these people effectively.”

Discussion

Interviews with fireground staff show that they gained substantial emotional benefits, at least in the short term, from their participation in the firefight. Similarly to the combat experience (Mouthaan et al., 2005) “ordeal by fire” is experienced as intensely psychologically impactful. All participants worked extremely hard and put in long hours under physiologically demanding conditions. This left them physically exhausted. Their reward, however, was a feeling of personal mastery and achievement and the feeling that they had made a meaningful contribution when it really mattered. Similarly to combat, firefighters developed a deep attachment to their comrades-in-arms and a feeling of ownership of the firefight. This is consistent with findings of previous research (Hetherington, 1993, Moran and Colless, 1995, McLennan and Birch, 2007) that emergency service work can involve considerable rewards.

This commitment to the fireground, while promoting a “high” in participants did contribute to difficulties in reintegrating into their usual lives. All participants

spoke of the “adrenalin rush” they had experienced as a result of their involvement in firefighting and many had difficulties “coming down off the high”. Physiologically what goes up must come down and a consequence of falling adrenalin levels may be lethargy, fatigue and mild depression. Firefighters also had a cognitive preoccupation with the fires for some time following deployment. Their body may have been back at their desk but their mind was still at the fireground. This suggests that it may be useful for firefighters to employ short, effective interventions to assist them to re-focus their attention to regular work and life activities (Waite and Holder, 2003). None of the firefighters interviewed felt a need for counselling or other support services. They did, however, feel a need to “off load” and talk about how impactful their experience had been, even when their experience had been uniformly positive. This suggests that emergency service managers should take some time to informally debrief all staff following their tours of duty on the fireground rather than just focus on those staff who may have experienced problems with their deployment.

Firefighters interviewed had a tendency to personalise their experience (e.g. many said such things as “I don’t know if it’s just me, but I felt...”) and didn’t seem to be aware that their experience was typical and common among anyone who had participated in the firefight. Possibly emergency response agencies need to raise staff awareness of the typicality of such reactions as feelings of disorientation and detachment and emphasise to all staff that readjustment following deployment to the intense and absorbing experience of firefighting is a process that may take some time. Managers need to be aware that staff returning from deployments are unlikely to return to peak performance for 4-5 days following their return. Managers should consider restructuring work demands to accommodate staff readjustment, e.g. by assigning lighter duties, delegating or getting assistance with more demanding work tasks, encouraging taking naps if necessary, avoiding long drives and ensuring that staff get adequate sleep, hydration and nutrition.

This paper argues that the typical experience of non-clinical emergency service workers: a) involves substantial emotional rewards and b) follows a typical pattern of readjustment that may present challenges to the workers reintegration into their normal life.

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