

# Abstract

**Purpose:** To compare the mental health problems of Special Forces with regular forces engaged in combat in the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN).

**Methods:** A population-based descriptive study was carried out to compare the mental health problems of Special Forces with regular forces in the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) deployed in combat areas for at least 1 year. Participants were selected by simple random sampling. The outcome measures were common mental disorder measured using the General Health Questionnaire, PTSD, fatigue, multiple physical symptoms and hazardous alcohol use.

**Results:** Overall exposure to potentially traumatic events was high in both groups, with Special Forces experiencing significantly more traumatic events. More than 80% of the Special Forces had experiences of discharging weapons in direct combat, engaging in combat with enemy vessels and seeing the dead or wounded. Special Forces had significantly less common mental disorders, fatigue and fair or poor general health than regular forces. Fair or poor general health (21.1%) and fatigue (18.4%) were the commonest problems in the regular forces. Hazardous drinking was the commonest mental health problem among the Special Forces (17%). Prevalence of PTSD was 1.9% in the Special Forces and 2.9% among the regular forces. Exposure to traumatic events and problems with family life were identified as risk factors.

**Conclusions:** Elite troops suffered less negative mental health consequences than regular forces despite higher combat exposure. Comradeship and unit cohesion protected Special Forces from negative mental health outcome of combat.