



by Chris Murray

In 2015, as a young Infantry lieutenant, I found myself once again in a crowded, overheated battalion conference room. I was attending what seemed to be the hundredth staff meeting since I had arrived at the unit two months earlier as my Battalion was preparing for a deployment across the Pacific Ocean. My battalion commander provided a significant update to our logistical coordination: we would be chartering a massive cargo ship to carry our Strykers, Blackhawks, Chinooks, humvees, and all supporting equipment with us. Then, throughout the deployment, this cargo ship would shuttle our equipment between the various host nations for our training exercises. As a shiny new lieutenant, I didn't understand much being said in the meeting. But I understood that for an Infantry battalion accustomed to having logistical support arranged for us, this was a serious undertaking for our S-4 shop.

I glanced at the S-4 to see his reaction to the news. The S-4 was asleep. Granted, he was attending probably his sixth or seventh "urgent" meeting of the day, and today had been calm compared to his past few weeks. Fresh out of Ranger School, where sleeping was a capital offense, I withheld the urge to throw a pen to wake him up and spare him his head. Poorly positioned to help, I instead scanned the rest of the staff. Two others were dozing off, and pretty much everybody in the room looked ready to do the same. It wasn't even lunch time. We were sleepwalking into a deployment.

Our Army Doesn't Sleep

Stories of dozing Officers probably don't surprise anyone who's spent time in the Infantry - or, really, in the Army as a whole. We're a force accustomed to stretching ourselves thin. A [2009 study](#) reported that at least 61% of service members average less than five hours of sleep per night. A [recent study](#) confirms similar rates of sleeplessness for the Army today. Compare this to less than 8% of civilians who sleep this little, and it's clear that our military distinguishes itself in its disregard for sleep.

The health consequences of this culture are both astounding and well documented. Sleeping less than seven hours per night has been [closely linked](#) to higher rates of obesity, anxiety, depression, and alcohol abuse. Do any of these issues sound familiar? [Walter Reed Army Institute of Research](#) (WRAIR) has done extensive research on the effects of sleep loss, and has found that Soldiers who average less than six hours of sleep per night are 4.7x more likely to develop PTSD and 11.4 times (!) more likely to develop depression. It's unsurprising, then, that the military as a whole has significantly [higher rates](#) of mental illness compared to the US population at large. These symptoms are familiar - we all know

Soldiers who struggle with weight, or regularly drink too much, or are inexplicably depressed (“demoralized,” we often say). Perhaps we are these soldiers ourselves. In each case, whether or not a Soldier’s physical or mental struggles pre-dated their time in service, such issues are no doubt exacerbated by years or decades of chronic sleep loss.

Leaders Sleep Last

It’s not just that we individually shun sleep—our Army collectively takes pride in functioning without it. Interviews with senior leaders have reported that they regularly sleep less than five hours per night, and combat arms leaders’ tolerance for sleep deprivation is a staple of conversation in those branches. In fact, just search any senior Army leader’s name along with the word “sleep,” and you can likely find an article reporting that your leader of choice sleeps less than five hours a night. This culture runs deep, and is ingrained in young Officers early. My first memorable interaction with any Officer, in fact, was during Cadet Basic Training, when an Infantry Captain told our groggy group of “New Cadets” to suck it up. He explained he hadn’t slept more than five hours a night since the day he joined the Army, and he was doing just fine.

And while the effects of sleeplessness are crushing for all, they pose a grave collective risk when our leaders suffer from them. A 2020 [NIH study](#) found that sleep deprivation has dire effects on decision-making. With sleep loss, the researchers found, “people [who are] habitually more reflective and cautious become more impulsive and prone to risk-taking during decision-making based on deliberative reasoning.” So while leaders often take pride in their ability to push through, to still get up for that PT session, to be the last one to leave the TOC—the result is worse decision-making. In effect, these sleepless leaders choose their ego over their team, their image over their responsibility to their soldiers. The consequential degraded capacity for decision-making inevitably creates risks both to mission and to force.

I can attest to many of these consequences as someone who has experienced both Army and civilian flavors of a demanding lifestyle. On active duty, I averaged less than six hours of sleep per night. As many do, I accepted that it was part of the job, even in a garrison environment. Over time, certain things became normal. I had a noticeably short attention span. At work and at home, my temper was short. Even when I had no pressing deadlines or major decisions on the horizon, I was anxious and periodically depressed.

When I transitioned out of the Army, I expected continued exhaustion and brain fog. Law school, like the Army, is not associated with restful sleep. But during my transition, a mentor advised me that her secret to success in law school was sleeping at least seven

hours a night. I decided to give it a try. Within weeks of normalizing my sleep schedule, I felt like a different person. I found I was able to focus more and remember details clearly. I was studying half as much as many classmates but retaining everything I needed to, allowing me to embrace extracurriculars, build a new career, and catch up on lost time with my wife. I also thought back on my time in the Army. What if I had thought this clearly, remembered things this well, been this patient and deliberate? How much better would I have been at developing tactical plans? How much more effectively would I have empathized with and developed my Soldiers?

Yes—it's a luxury that I had the time and space to discover this rested lifestyle. The constraints of Army life are entirely different, and mission requirements, not culture, sometimes dictate unavoidable sleep loss. But there are also many nights where sleep loss *is* avoidable. How often are Soldiers at work until 2000 simply "waiting on the word"? Or the S-3 shop held at the office to meet a tight deadline, only for their product to be reworked the next day? Or, the one day we actually get home at a reasonable hour, we fail to prioritize our own sleep, perpetuating the Army's culture of sleeplessness even on our own time? I would argue that most of the sleep deprivation in the Army is more cultural than mission-critical, and it's imposing huge and unnecessary costs on the force.

Impact to the Mission

In 2016, my unit's sleep-deprived S-4 and staff ultimately got the job done on deployment. But two years later, the same Brigade could not say the same about a rotation to the National Training Center. As a platoon leader in this Stryker unit, I knew that our OPTEMPO was, literally, an accident waiting to happen. During a month of intense training, one night an unrested Stryker crew [ran over](#) and killed a young Private—while he was sleeping. I was pained, but admittedly unsurprised, to hear that the pace of training had taken such a dramatic toll.

Yes, minimal sleep in combat is often unavoidable, and it is essential that we "train how we fight." However, as more research points to the dire costs of sleep loss, still no evidence proves mental performance under sleepless conditions is something we can train. The missteps and losses due to sleeplessness at the small-unit level must surely be magnified at the operational and strategic levels. A recent [NIH study](#) tested naval officers in a variety of simulated strategic scenarios, finding that sleep deprivation *severely degraded* the officers' ability "to foresee important problems within both the moral and tactical domain of the operation." We can't simply train for sleep deprivation. Quite the opposite: more and more research is showing that if we know sleepless times are coming, the best thing we can do is [rest consistently in advance](#). We simply haven't begun to acknowledge the toll our sleep loss

is taking, nor can we justify that toll in any serious, research-driven way.

Where Do We Go From Here?

I would love to propose a concrete action plan for building a healthier sleep culture. Unfortunately, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Although "next steps" vary significantly depending on one's context, I will provide some broadly applicable thoughts.

First, leaders at all levels should recognize the detriments of sleep deprivation, then implement solutions in their own spheres of influence. There is no better way to begin accomplishing this than by simply going to bed. Until each of us understands what a little extra sleep can mean in our own lives, studies and statistics just won't move the needle on changing the Army's culture of exhaustion.

Second, I encourage every reader to inform themselves on the devastating impacts of sleep loss. In particular, I recommend WRAIR's [website](#), for both their research findings and their recommended sleep maximization strategies. Perhaps better personal sleep habits and better information on sleep deprivation effects will enable leaders to overcome the temptation of eschewing sleep.

At a cultural level, we must stop lionizing sleepless schedules. Bloodshot eyes and endless coffee are not some sort of hero's scar; they're mostly just *sad* - and significantly less effective. A healthier culture set by leaders would acknowledge some unavoidable sleep deprivation, and correspondingly provide clear plans to enable Soldiers to rest up before and after.

If we're willing to acknowledge the magnitude of our sleep deprivation issue, we may find that it's not just a problem, but a huge opportunity. Keeping in mind the symptoms outlined above, it's easy to imagine how prominently sleep deprivation figures into the Army's shortcomings, at all levels—from our unfit Privates to our strategic failures in Afghanistan. All of these issues are complex, and a healthier sleep culture is no panacea. But perhaps our long list of problems for our large organization can be simply and sweepingly addressed by a single, straightforward solution: more sleep. All we require is for leaders to acknowledge the effects of sleep loss, let their Soldiers rest, and when in doubt, just go to bed.

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