

CHAPTER 11

The leave of absence from the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) had been granted, and I found myself in an environment with orange overalls, latrine buckets, and brusque methods. My colleagues and I were being prepared. We were in what felt like a realistic setting, even though deep down I knew it was pretend. Realistic based on what I could assess, while still being aware that there was an end. With abrasive metal around our wrists, we had no choice but to go along with what was happening. We were to practice relinquishing physical control over our bodies. It hurt, and at times, I was afraid. Or rather, startled and anxious, because true fear probably would have come first in an actual situation. Apprehensive about the unpredictable and the consequences that could follow when mistakes were made. And I made mistakes. It was part of the trial. But I did what I could to adhere to the Armed Forces' guidelines for behavior in captivity. Trying to resist exploitation while maintaining mental control and avoiding escalation of violence.

The captors didn't respect international law, and here it was a matter of following their instructions and not resisting physically. They had the upper hand, but through cooperation, maybe my colleagues and I could de-escalate the situation? I exerted myself to remain composed and not respond to their provocations. Even though it was in my human nature to react to insults, the situation required me to grit my teeth and be compliant. It was difficult, really difficult. But I knew that any argumentation would probably only lead to unnecessary risks for myself and others.

It wasn't just my heart that raced. Stressed captors could likely result in even more rough handling. Resistance was futile, and escaping wasn't possible either. It was about adapting and enduring. Maintaining a sense of dignity and self-respect while keeping the mind engaged.

I tried to learn as much as possible about the captors and map out their habits. Studying their routines provided a sense of security in an existence devoid of time or spatial perception. Who were they really? And what demands did they have? What had happened outside the hood during the abduction? How did my fellow captives seem to be faring? What could a potential escape look like? Would it lead to retaliation against those left behind? They couldn't access my brain, and I did what I could to keep it occupied. A form of mental survival.

My fellow captives and I were stronger together than individually. Just sitting shoulder to shoulder along the cool concrete wall provided warmth and a feeling of camaraderie. The camaraderie kept our courage up and kept the worst thoughts at bay. Even though the time in captivity was eroding, it was a matter of accepting the situation and persevering mentally. Keeping psychological control. I attempted to draw mental strength from the nostalgically distant past, when an old military saying came to me: 'A hunter doesn't freeze; he shivers with joy. First he shivers, then he turns blue, after that he dies. But damn it, he's never frozen.' I chuckled quietly to myself.

Most importantly, communication was key. So, there were whispers and body language among us captives, because we knew that if we could present a united front, much would be gained. Not least as support for each other and for those of us who were suffering the most. Through communication, we could also establish a form of relationship with the masked tormentors. It was important, especially to mitigate the dangerous situations that arose. Relationships could also make it harder for the captors to carry out their threats. By emphasizing our inherent worth as human beings, they might think twice. For instance, would a captor want the burden of killing a captive who was also a father? I didn't think so.

I remembered what I had read in the Armed Forces' guidelines, that the level of violence in actual captivity could be high and could involve physical abuse, mock executions, rape, mutilation, and staged releases. The exercise organizers had managed to create a lifelike environment, while still being far from all the acts of violence mentioned earlier. And since the setup is intended to be used again, I can't reveal more specific details about the appearance or conduct of the captivity.

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Several of those who participated in the preparatory training already had experience from military foreign missions. They were called veterans. I imagined that it was common to go on such adventures at a young age. I, however, turned 46 during the training and was on my way for the very first time. An international mission in the role of a temporarily promoted major. I had left my full-time position in the Defense Forces almost twenty years earlier, but for the past three years, I had been back in the ranks as a reserve officer. In the context that now prevailed, not in a camouflage but khaki uniform.

Our uniforms created unity and emphasized the importance of the collective rather than individual individuals. A collective in an organization whose pillars included authority, status, and hierarchy. In short: a cohesive organism whose ultimate task was to kill. And when that killing had to occur, it was important to lower our sense of individual responsibility in favor of ordered and legitimate action. This was part of a psychological process that also involved dehumanization of the enemy. This was done, for example, by stripping the enemy of human attributes, to lower the threshold for killing. This was particularly evident on the shooting range, where we shot at "targets" and not "people." Cardboard figures with roughly carved faces and malicious features. And instead of killing, what we did was called "neutralizing." This was psychologically easier if it happened at a distance so that we didn't have to face the enemy up close. In summary: obeying orders and killing the inhuman enemy, preferably from a distance.

Something I believe was lacking during the preparatory training was discussions about our own vulnerability and what we might need to do to another human being in the worst case. Conversations about death. But what do I know, maybe such discussions were considered soft or there simply wasn't enough time? However, I think this should have been part of the training, and it should also be a natural element in other defense force activities. It's too late to start this on the battlefield. I believe in talking about practical things like taking care of a fallen comrade, but also about the emotional aspects, like contemplating our own and our colleagues' deaths. Conversations and reflections about taking another person's life should also have a rightful place in all of this.

Although there were no organized discussions about death during the training, there was one occasion when it was brought to my attention more than ever. It was when I met my predecessor in the position. He had returned to Sweden the year before and told me in a hushed voice about his service in Africa. Not least about the time when he had to flee with bullets whizzing past his ears. The background to this dramatic event was a terrorist attack in which his colleague and friend lost his life. An incident that, among other things, made him lie low in the terrain overnight until a helicopter came to rescue him. Later, I found out that he had been interviewed about this and that there was a clip on YouTube titled: 'P-O Nordin survived the terrorist attack in Bamako – here is his story.'

P-O's charged words, along with headlines like 'UN's bloodiest mission ever,' sent shivers down my spine. At the same time, I began to understand more and more what I had agreed to and that I needed to make some personal preparations.

So, on my way home, I stopped at a funeral director's office to pick up a white folder. A stack of papers that might come in handy if all my desert sand were to run to the bottom of the hourglass.

The papers became another reminder that this was real. Even though my previous professional life had exposed me to many insidious threats, it had never felt like this. The realization of my own mortality was creeping close and deep under my skin. In the worst case, I could become the 83rd Swede to die in the military foreign force since 1956. Or maybe come home in a wheelchair?

That evening, I sat in the light of the kitchen lamp to write to my loved ones. 'Dad, when you read this, I'm no longer here...'

It didn't take long for the salty drops to turn into rough rings on the paper. My brain was racing with thoughts of how I would manage without my family and how they would manage without me. Apart from Niklas' military funeral 23 years earlier, I had only experienced the passing of older relatives. And now I sat at the kitchen table, planning what would be sung at my funeral. I thought of Eric Clapton's 'Tears in Heaven.'

Everything had happened very quickly. Nine weeks earlier, I had received a message on my phone that would change everything: 'I need to provide the name of an individual suitable for deployment in Mali with a very close deployment date. After reviewing all officers in the unit, the commander has determined that you are the most suitable.' Flattering to be chosen, I thought. At the same time, I wondered why the unit hadn't wanted to send a career officer and had instead selected a reserve officer like myself. Well, for me, it didn't really matter. I was getting the chance to go on an adventure.

The family reacted positively to the news that I might be going, which might have had to do with how I presented it. Many advantages and fewer disadvantages. Argumentation in line with a cleverly designed influence operation. After all, that's what I worked with as a reserve officer in the Psychological Operations Unit (PSYOPS). However, the family knew who they were dealing with, so there were some tough counterquestions, which also laid the foundation for a constructive conversation. A conversation that eventually led to the joint decision that I would go. I believe it became such a smooth decision thanks to the fact that my wife and I are clear about each other's needs and desires. Because of all my experiences, I have chosen to always try to be emotionally honest with my family. It hasn't always been easy, but I don't know where I would be now if I hadn't made that choice. Of course, I can't help but fall into some techniques of influence every now and then. I don't think I'll ever be able to shake off that aspect.

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"Minus 1 degree in Stockholm and plus 34 in Bamako. It's December 10, 2018, and the airplane has just landed. I'm loading my luggage into a jeep that's headed for the military base. We stop several times on the way there.

A multitude of children's feet in flip-flops at the traffic lights. They move carefree between vehicles, seeking money or something to put in their mouths. Children everywhere, many of them in primary school age. Their bright white smiles against the window light up the heavily polluted outdoor environment. Inside, I want to help, but the earlier stern words about not opening up echo in my head.

The area around our stationary car is like a big market. You can buy almost anything here, and if something isn't available, the children's legs can run off and fetch it. Nuts, water, fruit, toys, electronics, and car parts. There are even birds in cages. In the middle of the intersection stands a man in blue with a whistle, and a few meters away from him, a pickup truck with a machine gun on the roof. We are waved over.

A swarm of taxis, bicycles, donkey-drawn carts, and mopeds seems endless. On two-wheelers, ranging from young guys in suits to older women in colorful clothes. Families even ride on these mopeds, and there's even a live goat tied to the rear carrier. Many donkeys roam freely, or as freely as they can with loose ropes dangling between their front and hind legs. The traffic moves forward in organized chaos.

"It's important not to hesitate here. Those who hesitate won't make it through. You have to keep up and show that you want to move forward," the driver says, his feet aggressively dancing on the pedals. He pushes the unprotected jeep so that it can continue along the river of vehicles.

After a little over half an hour, we arrive at the base. A fort located in the city's banking district. A Czech guard with an automatic rifle signals us forward. Mirrors are brought out to check the underside of the car for homemade bombs. Devices that could have been attached while we were stuck in traffic.

A thumbs up and we can proceed behind the wall of sandbags. Into the place that will be my home for the next twelve months.

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Inside the sandbags was the headquarters for the EU's military training mission in the country. A country that, according to data from the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, is roughly three times the size of Sweden. Within its straight national borders, the Niger River winds like a life-giving nerve. The country is home to about 20 million inhabitants (2020), nearly half of whom are under 15 years old. This explained why we saw children everywhere in the traffic environment. "The traffic is the most dangerous thing you'll encounter down there," one of the instructors in the training back home in Sweden had said. In the two-million city of Bamako, the traffic flowed chaotically but somewhat controlled over tall speed bumps and deep potholes. A traffic environment that was estimated to claim an average of 18 human lives per day. At least that's what the text "On the Streets of Bamako" published on the Swedish Armed Forces' website seemed to suggest.

The EU's military training mission had been in place since 2013 to restore law and order and combat terrorism. In short, it involved advising the country's defense leadership and training their military personnel in the mission to eliminate terrorists. Altogether, the mission consisted of 700 individuals from 28 nations. We were around a hundred at the headquarters in the capital, while the others were in Koulikoro, about 60 kilometers away. Among them were my eight Swedish colleagues. Always ready and with our guns holstered, I spent most of my time within the protective sandbags of the headquarters. An area so small that my running loop stopped at 270 meters. This was where we worked, ate, trained, socialized, and slept.

With threats constantly present, it was surreal to see daily life go on more or less as usual outside the sandbags. My colleagues and I found ourselves voluntarily confined within the firm grip of the European Union and the German general. We were placed in an institutional environment, but despite it all, we were glad that the Czech guard force had their rifles pointed outward and not inward. Because if they had been pointed inward, we might as well have been interned for real. The headquarters was housed in an old building that, by Swedish standards, could be likened to a shabby rural motel from the 70s. The rooms were shared in pairs, and in most of them, the air conditioning provided a blast of cold air. The showers, on the other hand, offered a lottery, and you could never be sure whether water would actually flow or not. Many gym sessions ended with washing up using the bottled water we otherwise drank.

We spent our days doing office work in front of screens, a routine that went on from Monday to Saturday. The work could involve collecting experience reports from conducted training sessions, compiling statistics, or planning for upcoming trainings. We also conducted meetings, organized internal training, and arranged defense exercises, among other tasks. We were four overqualified officers with relatively straightforward tasks, sometimes enough for two. That's what the EU had decided. These relatively simple tasks reminded us of the voluntary internment, but unlike what might be the case in a correctional facility, we weren't manufacturing games but rather creating simple PowerPoint presentations and Excel spreadsheets. During my year at the headquarters, the team consisted of an ambitious Austrian, an analytical Dutch, a homesick Slovenian, and a retired Hungarian. We were all alike yet different, and I was their leader.

The work was monotonous and relatively similar day by day. Moreover, we did practically everything together, with few opportunities to retreat and be completely alone. Like a group of firefighters back home in Sweden, we worked, ate, and trained together. We used to joke that we were stuck in a reality reminiscent of the old 90s movie "Groundhog Day" with Bill Murray. A movie in which the days were the same because everything unfolded in exactly the same way as the previous day. This was something we recognized in the staff too. In our cafeteria, there was a cutlery basket that used to tip over from its weight every morning. As soon as it happened again, we would nod knowingly and say, "Groundhog Day!"

We could also laugh about the more densely staffed nations' traditions and activities. Some that stood out were Germany, France, and Spain. Not just because they had the most personnel, but also because of what they did. Formal torchlight processions from Germans with a fondness for strict routine descriptions. Rule-breaking and clandestine contacts from the French, who had a grand self-image. And siestas and fiestas from the Spaniards with a mañana mentality. Grossly generalized, I know. The theme of internment also came up in these contexts, and we used to joke that the listed nations formed so-called "Prison Gangs." These were the things we could talk about while waiting for the cutlery basket to tip over. Humor was an important part of getting through these long days. The atmosphere, as I remember it, was very calm and slow, a clear reflection of our days. The small area almost radiated that atmosphere. Everyone was in the same situation, and everyone could

Everyone was in the same situation, and everyone could relate to each other. Not much needed to be said. It was during mealtime conversations that I learned the most. One of the topics we discussed was the approach to parenting with rewards or punishments. In this context, I found out that some South German and Austrian parents sometimes scared their children with an old Swedish torture method. The so-called 'Schwedentrunk' (Swedish drink). A method where the victim had a wooden stick against their tongue and was forced to swallow large amounts of foul-smelling liquid, such as excrement. The name is said to have been coined by German victims of Swedish troops during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Besides this pure curiosity, the conversations also led me to see myself as a Swede through the eyes of my foreign colleagues. There was a lot I learned during my year in Mali, things I'm incredibly grateful for today.

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Headquarters life was like living in an institutionalized bubble, always having the loaded weapons close at hand. The best remedy to break the repetitive routine was to go out and participate in various training activities. Often using a jeep, but for longer trips by helicopter or airplane. This led to numerous day and overnight trips to different regions, especially to Koulikoro where my Swedish colleagues were located. Here, trainings were conducted in areas such as weapon handling, combat techniques, medical care, urban combat, vehicle service, leadership, and human rights.

In Mali, our mission wasn't to teach the Schwedentrunk but to promote human rights. However, instructing about the laws of war was not always easy, as one of our international law instructors could attest. On one occasion, when she asked the Malian troops how they should treat prisoners of war, their response was that they must be shot. The instructor then engaged in discussion, but the soldiers stuck to their answers, believing that the enemy had supernatural abilities. Not that they could fly or anything, but that they could see in the dark and move silently and through matter. Therefore, locking prisoners in a cell or placing them behind fences would have no effect, as the convinced soldiers believed the enemy could effortlessly pass through physical obstacles.

This might sound strange to those who are present to uphold human rights and promote democracy. I believe that those who teach these subjects should take historical, ethnic, and religious considerations into account, as well as genuinely immerse themselves in other people's culture and traditions. It's probably only then that there's a possibility of approaching any kind of change in the attitudes and behaviors of those being taught. It's also not sufficient to simply export Western thinking and tactics to a country like Mali.

Personally, I didn't have much contact with those being trained, but in my headquarters bubble, there was the cleaner, Aboubacar. He became my connection to the country I so eagerly wanted to explore further, and we used mobile language translation for communication. Every day, he struggled with his cleaning cart, always wearing a big smile. Aboubacar dreamed of studying sociology at university, and what he knew about Sweden was that it was a cold country known for Zlatan Ibrahimović. He loved Malian culture with its songs and dances, and when the workday ended, he left our fortified compound and went home. For him, the world on the other side of the sandbags might not have been more dangerous than how I perceive it at home in Stockholm. He must have wondered about all the security measures surrounding our base in the middle of the city, but it was something he never talked about. Looking back, I also regret not discussing his views on death with him.

Despite the contact with Aboubacar and the camaraderie from my colleagues, long periods confined in a foreign land led to homesickness. My colleagues and I had each other and shared the same situation, but companionship couldn't completely overcome the longing for home. I think it was due to several factors. A desire to withdraw and at least eat a meal by oneself. But also, to be part of a national community and not the sole Swede at the headquarters. And of course, to not be trapped behind sandbags but to be able to move freely. Homesickness was strongest during holidays, although I had the opportunity to go home four times during my twelve months in the desert country. It was wonderful to come home and see my family.

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I pull up the zipper of the mosquito net with a swift motion. Past the two loaded weapons and towards the phone on the metal box. An unanswered call. Damn! My colleague in Koulikoro answers quickly and calmly. 'Two vehicles, loaded with explosives. Precision fire as a diversionary maneuver.' He continues with a brisk tone. 'The Spanish security force opened fire with heavy machine guns. The main gate was blocked. All terrorists are dead. We're okay, but we're on high alert.' From my position on the edge of the bed, I listen to every syllable, while my free hand fidgets with the loaded carbine. My body is sweaty, possibly due to the air conditioning or thoughts of what happened. I imagine luck and margins, feeling the excitement of being locked in and six miles away. At the same time, my mind begins to picture the explosion, as if I were there at the main gate when it happened. After the blast, a black cloud and a shaking breeze that quickly sweeps the cloud away. An air pressure that compresses the chest in an uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing way. Lying flat on the ground and

feeling the strength drain from the fingertips. I put on my uniform and stride into the command center. It's bustling with activity, and I quickly realize that today will be different. No Groundhog Day. The general has taken command and put the organization on a war footing. Now begins the work that soldiers do best: leading operations.

The attack occurred early in the morning when almost everyone was asleep. Two pickup trucks loaded with explosives, closely followed by motorcycles, while small-caliber fire crackled from different directions. No doubt it was planned and coordinated. After the security force responded with their heavy machine gun, the base's warning systems started blaring. Air-pressured sirens loud enough to wake the dead. Besides the two terrorists in the pickups, the attack also claimed the life of a passerby.

My colleagues in Koulikoro weren't just lucky. The security force's initiative and actions in the moment were crucial. Protective angels. In the hours that followed, I maintained close contact with my Swedish colleagues over there, and the next day, I went to meet them. They had been awakened by explosions and gunfire in the middle of the night, and one of them had been involved in clearing the attack site and moving charred remains and a spine.

For most people, mangled and damaged bodies are terrifying. Experiencing such things can be traumatic. That's why it can be helpful to remember that the physical body is not a person, but only its remains. During tasks like clearing, participants often develop a kind of mental "shell" as protection. At the same time, emotions like sorrow, regret, disgust, anger, and meaninglessness can emerge. Humor can be a way to cope with these uncomfortable feelings, which is why what's often called 'gallows humor' should be seen as a normal reaction and a 'safety valve.'

Even before I went to Koulikoro, I heard the grinding of gears on the phone line. A creaking that stemmed from the fact that the Swedish Armed Forces hadn't reached out or asked about their well-being. The disappointment was compounded by the fact that the incident hadn't been acknowledged on the agency's website. I pulled a few strings and eventually those knots were untied. Being seen, heard, and acknowledged can be crucial in a difficult situation. Especially for continued processing. It seems to be just as important whether it's about working as a police officer in Sweden, picking up body parts along a commuter train line, or being a soldier and tackling a similar task at the entrance to an African military base. Or waking up in the middle of the night and perhaps fearing for one's life.

The attack shook me in several ways, causing me to depart from the routine daily life with its negative stress. Instead, I switched to maximum mode. For me, the attack was both close and far away. A reminder that what I had learned during the preparatory training was real and could happen. Yet, life in the capital continued almost as usual. Almost as if nothing had happened, even though it was just six miles away. Perhaps psychological factors led to a relatively quick mental return to normalcy? Similar to returning to everyday life after a terrorist attack in Stockholm or elsewhere.

This process of normalization also affected me. Because even though the attack was a temporary awakening and a reminder of why we were all armed in the structured everyday environment, I was soon back to what mattered before. Not that I had been careless or inattentive before. Rather, always being prepared but also allowing myself to relax at times. Not constantly thinking about what might happen. Twelve months of round-the-clock 'what if' thoughts would probably break down even the strongest. Fortunately, the Swedish Armed Forces were there to monitor my mental well-being before, during, and after the mission.

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During my twelve months in Africa, I maintained continuous contact with the Headquarters in Stockholm so they could have an understanding of my well-being and situation. On two occasions, officers from the capital also came down to gather information in order to plan and tailor reintegration activities and ongoing follow-up.

During one of these instances, they were accompanied by one of Sweden's two four-star generals. The other one was in my contact list and had been the person I reached out to shortly after the attack. But this particular four-star general was nearly the same age as my father and also had royal blood in his veins.

I found myself sitting face to face with Sweden's monarch in a small VIP dining room. A solemn moment that I later realized my die-hard royalist friends and relatives probably valued more than I did. Even though I was nervous, I didn't dwell on the significance of it all at that moment. The King had appeared with very short notice (to us) and wanted to learn more about what I and my Swedish colleagues were working on. We did our best to inform him, and he listened with interest. However, a few hours later, we were far from the grandeur and back in our routine. Afterwards, a sense of pride set in while I pondered what I had just experienced. It took time to gather my thoughts.

In terms of the number of bodyguards, it was evident that the King's life was more valuable than mine. And I believe that's how it should be. He faces a completely different set of threats, and the symbolic value of losing a monarch is significantly greater than losing a middle-aged labor market tourist from a Stockholm suburb. Yet, there's something called the equal value of all human beings. Imagine if the attack on Koulikoro had happened where the King and I were sitting and eating. Would Western medical care have been provided based on both our equal value, with priority given to whoever had the greatest actual need? Or would blue blood have trumped red? Thankfully, there was never a need to answer these questions. Everything went well, and both of us left the country shortly before the pandemic hit the world. The King isolated himself at Stenhammar Castle, and I transitioned to a new assignment before the organized reintegration process with conversations and health checkups.

The reintegration process was a part of the Swedish Armed Forces' responsibility to follow up on all those who participated in international military operations. This responsibility began even before departure and, according to the law, extended for five years after the mission.

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A gust of wind brushes against my face. I take a deep breath and feel the sensation of moist, oxygen-rich air passing through my mouth before continuing down my throat and windpipe. Incredibly fresh and far from the dirty air I've breathed over the past year in Mali. The air of burning garbage resulting from all waste being dumped, for example, at a street intersection and then set on fire. It's difficult to argue for environmental concerns with those who live without Western waste management. They believe the waste once came from nature and that fire makes it return there.

I get into the car without body armor or an automatic rifle. With a sense of weariness and ambivalence, I reflect on the year in Mali. Considering the small impact we likely made, it might have seemed like a waste, but still an amazing time. A time in a country so different from my own that it brought forth gratitude for things I had previously taken for granted. Fresh air and a paved road, for instance. Plus, I returned home unharmed.

Arriving at the conference venue, I have fifteen minutes to myself. Just mine. I step up in front of around thirty other people who have also been dispatched to various corners of the world. I share my story, they listen attentively, and they ask questions. Their attention is worth more than all the medals I've received and gives me chills. It's liberating to put my own experience into words. A story that nobody outside my family had really had the time or interest to listen to before.

Taking a sip of conference coffee, I reflect on how valuable it would have been if my regular employer had given me, say, 15 minutes during a work meeting after my return. But maybe the everyday demands and obligations stood in the way? But what if. Life back home had carried on as usual. Once back, it was straight into the hamster wheel again with time reporting, result follow-ups, and paperwork exercises. The bureaucracy had to be fed.

"Well, where have you been?" I might hear from those who lived in the parallel reality. Or was it me who had lived in a parallel reality? My reality. Which was now gone. And probably wouldn't come back. A reality that didn't quite fit into the Swedish everyday life. At least not for someone now living a 562-mile bird's flight away from what had been. But at least I could call myself a veteran. Whatever value that might hold.

The Swedish Armed Forces' reintegration program continued with more presentations, stress lectures, psychological conversations, medical examinations, and returning desert equipment. An incredibly good way to meet others and tie up loose ends. Not least because it meant encountering some of those who were part of the preparatory hostage exercise.

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All in all, we were 1202 Swedes who participated in international military missions that year (2019). People like me who contributed to maintaining a more than 60-year unbroken tradition of peacekeeping operations worldwide. In the early 1990s, the Middle East dominated, followed by the Balkans for about a decade. Starting from the turn of the millennium, Sweden contributed troops to the mission in Afghanistan, but since 2014 and up until recently, Africa has been the primary area for military operations. Over the years, more than 66,000 Swedes have been involved in these types of international assignments. Around 54,000 of them were alive in February 2020. My colleagues and I at the conference facility now belonged to this group. Quite an illustrious company.

Throughout history, war has caused problems beyond the physical injuries one might immediately think of. Often, these problems have appeared as unexpected and had vague expressions, making them difficult to diagnose. Conditions that have been given various names over time, but fundamentally they are the same kinds of consequences, caused by extreme mental and physical stress during wartime.

My deployment could surely be compared to a vacation trip in comparison to those, for example, who were in the Congo in the 1960s. I wonder about the past. When Balkan or Congo veterans returned home, for instance. What support did they receive to process their experiences? Did anyone want to listen? Did their experiences lead to troubled marriages? Mental health issues? Financial problems? Suicides? How are they living today?

Many of these questions are difficult to answer. But since 1990, there's been a company commissioned by the Swedish Armed Forces that conducts registry studies on Swedish military veterans who served abroad. Data is collected from sources such as the National Board of Health and Welfare, Statistics Sweden, and the Swedish Armed Forces. The purpose of these studies is to

examine and follow up on the condition after returning from international deployments, and each year a report is published focusing on either mental health, physical health, or social outcomes.

The results from the studies show, among other things, that Swedish military veterans who have served since 1990 have similar or better mental and physical health after returning compared to individuals in a control group. The studies also show that veterans do not commit violent crimes to a greater extent than others, but divorces are more common and marriages somewhat less common.

I myself kept my marriage intact and believe that the reintegration support I received was probably much better than what many earlier veterans received. A homecoming without mandatory questions about whether I could continue my service for a few more days. Similar to the question I received after Johan hung himself in the military barracks about twenty years earlier. Several things had changed for the better during my years away from the Armed Forces.

The Swedish Armed Forces took their responsibility, absolutely. However, the closest support upon returning home still came from the family. In 2019, they provided the greatest and most important effort. They stayed at home and showed a big heart when they said yes to lending me to the Swedish Armed Forces and Mali for twelve months.

Better to die for something than to live for nothing.

George S. Patton (1885–1945)