

Tales of the Soldiers in the Middle of Armed-Conflict: Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of Filipino soldiers in this study will be able to help current service members, those thinking about a military career, as well as the general public. It examines the definition of "soldier" across numerous militaries and the various military careers that call for certain knowledge and skill sets. The difficulties that troops undergo include long separations from their families and ongoing danger. Specifically, armed conflicts in the province of Misamis Occidental in the Philippines highlight recent clashes between the Philippine Army and the New People's Army (NPA) rebels. This study aims to determine the profile of the soldiers in terms of age, sex, rank, and social status, and to explore the experiences of soldiers in the middle of armed conflicts. This study used the phenomenological design method of qualitative research to examine how Filipino soldiers felt while carrying out their tasks and responsibilities. The data analysis procedure followed Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology and sought to identify significant themes and essences generated from the participants' experiences. The study was conducted in Region X, Misamis Occidental, Philippines with five participants who are all experienced Filipino soldiers. The researchers interviewed the said participants, all of which are from Misamis Occidental, Philippines, with an average service in the military of at least three years. The participants were interviewed in their homes, observing proper health protocols given the Covid-19 strain. During the interview, the soldiers stressed the difficult nature of counterinsurgency deployments, emphasizing the need for protection through alertness, cooperation, and prayer. Because of their sense of purpose and desire to protect their family and serve their country, they demonstrated great intrinsic motivation and steadfast dedication. In conclusion, military operations faced demanding circumstances, requiring them to be vigilant and collaborate while seeking protection through prayer. Although they encountered risks, many expressed gratitude for minimal casualties and the challenging nature of counterinsurgency deployments. Teamwork and unity were crucial during these deployments, with coordination and cooperation among soldiers playing essential roles in navigating hostile environments.

Keywords: Armed conflicts; Armed forces; Danger; Enemy; Experiences; Rebels; Soldiers.

1. Introduction

In most armies, the word "soldier" generally refers to all members of any army, distinct from more specialized military occupations that require different areas of knowledge and skill sets (Smith, 2019). "Soldiers" may be referred to by titles, names, nicknames, or acronyms that reflect an individual's military occupation specialty arm, service, or branch of military employment, their type of unit, or operational employment or technical use such as trooper, tanker (a member of tank crew), commando, dragoon, infantryman, guardsman, artilleryman, paratrooper, grenadier, ranger, sniper, engineer, sapper, craftsman, signaller, medic, or gunner, among other terms. The length of time an individual is required to serve as a soldier has varied with the country and historical period, whether that individual has been drafted or has voluntarily enlisted (O'Brien, 2019).

Depending on the army's need for staffing or the individual's fitness and eligibility, such service may involve fulfilling a contractual obligation. The life of a soldier is not easy; they are often required to be away from their families for extended periods and are in constant danger (Meyer, 2018). Despite all of this, they continue to serve their country and protect its citizens because they believe in what they are fighting for and are committed to their fellow soldiers (Erwin, 2022).

In the Philippines, the military personnel are collectively known as the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Moreover, the Army, Air Force, and Navy are the AFP's three primary service branches (including the Marine Corps) (De Castro, (2022)). The Philippine Army is headed by the Chief of the Army, attaining the rank of

Lieutenant General, which then serves as the main combat-viewing division in any area of the country. A situation in which nations or other organized parties engage in combat using military force is called an armed conflict (Kadir, 2019). International humanitarian law – the laws of war – establishes what can and cannot be done by parties to an armed conflict. These laws seek to minimize human suffering and protect civilians and combatants who no longer participate in hostilities, such as prisoners of war (Gisel, 2020). Even so, many of the gravest human rights violations are committed in war, which include using rape as a weapon of war, recruiting children to serve on the frontlines, launching direct attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, and indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks (Laudati, 2019). According to Geneva Convention Common Article 3 (2022), the definition of non-international armed conflict is essential that it must occur on the territory of a high contracting party/state and that it assumes that an armed conflict exists when the situation reaches a certain level that sets it apart from other forms of violence like riots, sporadic, and isolated forms of violence, reminiscent of the ones in Misamis Occidental (D'Alessandra, 2019).

On Tuesday morning, July 27, the Philippine Army (PA) participated in a new armed conflict with alleged New People's Army (NPA) rebels in Calamba, Misamis Occidental; this was the second incident in just over two weeks. While there was an "undetermined" number of deaths on the part of the enemies, no military personnel perished (ÖZMEN, 2023). The conflict happened more than two weeks after the battalion ran with the same communist rebels on July 11, who affiliated with the Western Mindanao Regional Party Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Another conflict happened in Lopez Jaena, Misamis Occidental, last January 20, 2022 – the AFP and CPP-NPA engaged in an armed confrontation in Barangay Bagong Silang; 5 barangays in Misamis Occidental were impacted, totaling 68 families or 230 people (Arriescado, 2022). Furthermore, Troops recovered Monday (September 28, 2020) personal belongings, including assorted medicines and a 40-millimeter grenade launcher belonging to the communist New People's Army rebels following a 20-minute clash in Barangay San Lorenzo, Barangay Sinacaban, Misamis Occidental (Bughrara, 2023). The military says no one was hurt on the government side (Garcia, 2020). These conflicts are almost of everyday living of armed individuals, and with these flabbergasting scenes unhesitatingly, these personnel come to different realizations every day (Shay, 2019).

This paper provide knowledge and insights to active soldiers and aspiring individuals who want to join the army from the retired soldiers of the Philippines (Ross, 2023). This paper also works toward allocating apprehension and information to individuals who could not experience life in the Philippine military (Brose, 2019).

Through this research, the community will be able to comprehend the experiences of a Philippine soldier and be aware of their life in an army in general (Yambao, 2022). Furthermore, aspiring individuals will most likely be able to weigh their life decisions and learn more about being in the Philippine Army (Fruttero, 2022). Moreover, the analysis presented in this study will convey valuable information for future research, looking at the life of a soldier in an armed conflict in the Philippines (Gross, 2021).

2. Methods and Materials

This study used the phenomenological design method of qualitative research to examine how Filipino soldiers felt while carrying out their tasks and responsibilities. The data analysis procedure followed Moustakas' transcendental

phenomenology and sought to identify significant themes and essences generated from the participants' experiences. The phenomenological design emphasizes understanding the wholeness of experiences and eliminates preconceived notions or biases that may hinder a comprehensive understanding. In this research approach, the researcher approaches the study with the understanding and willingness to explore the phenomena as what they truly are. The researcher can examine the core of the experiences provided by the interviewed Philippine soldiers by putting assumptions and prejudices aside. This study aimed to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the experiences of Philippine soldiers by using the abovementioned phenomenological methodology. This strategy offers an invaluable chance to learn about the particular difficulties, viewpoints, and ideas that emerge in the context of their positions. The research offers a thorough and insightful examination of these people's obligations and liabilities by probing their lived experiences.

The study was conducted in Clarin, Misamis Occidental, Philippines, under Region X. The researchers accord the said study at the comfort of the participant's home, observing proper health protocols given by the local government unit (LGU) with regards to the Covid-19 strain. The Municipality of Clarin is a 4th class municipality in the province of Misamis Occidental, Philippines. According to the 2020 census, it has a population of over 39,356 people, with a subdivision of 29 barangays in total.

The participants in this study were selected based on their affiliation with the military in Misamis Occidental, Philippines. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure a diverse range of experiences and perspectives among the participants. Five individuals, consisting of both retired and active military soldiers, were selected to participate in this research. The participants' identities have been anonymized using pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality.

The primary research instrument used in this study was a qualitative interview guide. The interview guide was designed to explore various aspects of the participants' military experiences, motivations, challenges, and contributions. The guide consisted of open-ended questions grouped into thematic sections. The questions were designed to elicit rich and detailed responses from the participants, allowing them to reflect on their experiences and perspectives.

Before beginning the data gathering, the researchers requested approval from the university's dean of the College of Criminology with a letter of intent (LOI) to proceed with the study and perform the formal interview. Once the dean approved the letter of intent (LOI), the researchers made an appointment with the chosen individuals and presented an interview schedule. The participants were told that the talk would be recorded and that the interview would be conducted following the minimal health protocol in light of the pandemic.

The researchers upheld ethical norms in the current study. The researchers have scrupulously upheld all study participants' voluntary involvement; by allowing them to sign an informed consent form that the researchers created, they had ensured that the interview would only take place with the participants' expressed and written approval. The researchers took steps to promote anonymity and secrecy concerning the participants' identities by refraining from discussing any participants' names while conducting the interview. Privacy and confidentiality are always upheld, especially regarding participant names and other details not necessary to the study.

An overarching snapshot of the qualitative implementation process is a series of modified focus groups where participants meet to engage in ethics and safety training on planning for an advocacy event. In an attempt to overcome the limitations of current approaches to the abovementioned data analysis, researchers should respect, balance, and take into account their interpretations of the phenomenon and those of the participant's own (Ciolan, 2017). Moreover, visual data can be used to triangulate narrative data to enhance the credibility of this research (Plunkett et al., 2013). Other possible sources of data depend on whether the researchers or community leaders build in other components to the project but may include brief demographic surveys, interview transcripts, chat transcripts from virtual photovoice implementation, observational data detailing the context of implementation, or post-surveys to evaluate participant experiences with the involvement in this study. Qualitative research generally produces much data, and it is always important to plan ahead for having data in images and text. The researchers interviewed five chosen participants, all from Misamis Occidental, Philippines, with an average service in the military of at least three years. The participants were interviewed in their homes, observing proper health protocols given the Covid-19 strain. Before the interview, the researchers clarified that their identity and personal information had been confidential to the participants.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Profile of the Participants

A total of two (2) active members of the Philippine Army and three (3) retired soldiers participated in the study conducted face-to-face in different parts of Misamis Occidental, Philippines. All of the participants' ages ranged from 21 to 58, all of whom were male and had served and are still serving their duties in the Philippines.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Participant	Age	Years of Service
1	37	16 years
2	39	19 years
3	64	33 years
4	62	25 years
5	70	26 years

3.2. Tales of Soldiers in Armed Conflict

This part presents different themes that were derived from the different responses of the participants of the study during the conduct of the interview. The study explored the tales of soldiers in the middle of armed conflict. Themes were derived from the responses of the participants of the study after conducting an interview. The study identified five (5) appropriate themes: (1) Deployment for Counter Insurgencies, (2) Motivation, and Dedication, (3) Casualties and Injuries, (4) Communication Challenges, and (5) Advice to Aspiring Soldiers.

3.3. Deployment for counterinsurgency

The participants had to be awake and show the presence of mind because they were put in demanding, quick-moving circumstances. They stress the importance of being watchful and ready, utilizing collaboration and praying for protection. The counterinsurgency deployment highlights the challenging nature of their military operations designed to address and defeat insurgency within the nation (Onuoha, 2023).

Code Name	Responses
P1	“My last encounter was when I was in Davao, that was year 1991.”
P2	“Insurgencies and operations in rural areas.”
P3	“A lot of war, in Zamboanga, Lanao, Agusan, and Surigao Del Norte/Sur. These are the areas where I rendered my duty during the time of Calamity.”
P4	“As to what I remembered, I encountered an armed conflict in Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, and Surigao.”
P5	“When I was still active, I was assigned at Samar, Leyte, and Bohol during my deployment on those areas I was able to experienced war against the terrorist.”

The value of cooperation and unity during these deployments, their fellow troops' coordination and collaboration highlighted the critical significance of mutual trust and dependence on one another to negotiate dangerous conditions successfully (Salas, 2020). It also mentioned the region or location where they were stationed, a rebel-infested area.

3.4. Motivation and Dedication

Motivation and dedication resonate strongly in the participants' narratives, reflecting their unwavering commitment to their roles as soldiers in the Philippine Army. Despite their immense challenges, the participants expressed a deep sense of purpose in their service (Arar, 2019). They highlight the intrinsic motivation that kept them going, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling their duties excellently and providing for their families. Their families are a significant source of inspiration as they strive to be good providers and protectors. The thought of ensuring the safety and well-being of their loved ones fuels their dedication and propels them forward, even in the face of adversity (Patnaik, 2021). Moreover, the significance of serving their country and fellow countrymen emphasizes the need to render expert and just service. They view their roles as a means to contribute to the greater good and positively impact their nation.

Code Name	Responses
P1	“The thought of being able to do your job well and get through your job as a soldier was what kept me going and motivated me all throughout this journey.”
P3	“We always pray directly to God, because we dedicate everything, we do to him.”

P4	“Your bravery is not the only thing that you should prepare for in an armed conflict, but more so your whole self as there is no conviction/certainty that you will get out of the conflict alive. I have also been praying to motivate me amidst all the dangerous battles that I have been into, to keep me and my unit safe.”
P5	“Just pray always to God because God knows everything that will happen to you and he will always guide and motivate his people.”

They demonstrate unwavering dedication despite the demands of their military duty. To overcome any barriers that stand in their way, they talk about the need to remain motivated even in the face of difficulty. This unwavering commitment results from a strong sense of duty and a firmly held conviction in the significance of their duties (Muhumed, 2018).

3.5. Casualties and Injuries

The incidents where their units were involved in armed conflict suffered casualties and injuries. In expressing the solemnity and gravity of such circumstances, the participants acknowledge their catastrophic effects on people and their families. A great sense of regret and sorrow surrounds these awful events as they recall the unfortunate loss of their fellow soldiers (Weingarten, 2023). The participants also discuss their and fellow soldiers' injuries, highlighting the psychological and physical costs of military missions. A solemn reminder of the sacrifices made by people who serve in the armed forces and the inherent risks they encounter while performing their duties is provided by the theme of casualties and injuries.

Code Name	Responses
P1	“During my first encounter, 14 men were injured – however, we were fortunate enough that no one was killed during the course of the conflict.”
P3	“We got ambushed, three of our members died and four were slightly wounded.”
P4	“There was a total of us during our first ever encounter, however because of the unfortunate event, 5 were wounded and 4 of the men were killed.”

It emphasizes the psychological cost of losing friends and the long-term consequences of injuries received while performing official duties. This arouses a strong sense of admiration and gratitude for the courage and tenacity shown by military men, who selflessly risk their lives for the benefit of society (Roberts, 2018).

3.6. Communication Challenges

The difficulties faced by soldiers in maintaining contact with their families and loved ones during their deployments. The limited means of communication available to them, with cellular phones being scarce or nonexistent during their service. They recall the longing to connect with their families and the frustration of having

to wait until returning home to have meaningful conversations. The distance and separation from their loved ones compounded the challenges, as they were often stationed far away from home, making regular communication even more challenging (Dywer, 2022). The impact of these communication challenges, underscoring the importance of treasuring the moments of connection and emphasizing the resilience and strength required to endure the emotional strain of being apart from family for extended periods.

Code Name	Responses
P1	“It was very hard keeping in touch with my family before, because cellular phones were hardly available at that time. We were only able to talk to them when we get home from deployment.”
P2	“It was hard keeping in touch with our family before, so we were only able to talk when we get home from being deployed.”
P3	“Our only way in contacting our family is through letter only because that time Cellphones and Telegram were not yet available.”
P4	“To be really honest, the only way and time that I could talk to my family before was when I get home from deployment, because there were still no cellular phones in the past.”

The effect that communication difficulties have on their mental health. Being unable to connect with loved ones quickly leaves them feeling alone and isolated (Zamir, 2018). Their mood and emotional health may suffer greatly from the need to hear familiar voices and get information from home. They also draw attention to the reliance on conventional methods of communication, like letters or telegrams, which frequently led to sporadic and delayed exchanges. They remember the excitement and happiness of getting a letter or communication from home, and they treasure those few times of closeness (Winnicott, 2018).

3.7. Advice to Aspiring Soldiers

The importance of entering the military with a clear and fixed decision understanding of the weight of the commitment and the potential risks involved (Ferrell, 2021). The need for discipline, both in terms of personal conduct and adherence to protocols and regulations. The significance of physical, mental, and spiritual preparedness, as military service requires resilience and endurance in challenging situations. Aspiring soldiers must prioritize education and continuous learning, as knowledge and skills are crucial to their effectiveness as military personnel (Mohamed, 2021). The value of pure intentions and a genuine desire to serve the country rather than being enticed solely by the allure of firearms or other aspects of military life. The theme of advice to aspiring soldiers serves as a guiding light for those considering a career in the military, offering insights and wisdom gained from firsthand experiences.

Code Name	Responses
P1	“To the outgoing Philippine soldiers as well as to people who are planning to join the army, all I can say is give skillful and just service to the country and to your fellow countrymen so that when the time comes, you will be able to retire with tranquility and peace of mind.”
P2	“Before you sign up for the military, you should first have an already fixed decision, because when you enter the Philippine military, your life will always be on death row.”
P3	“To those who wants to become a Philippine Army, always exercise presence of mind. They need to study in order for them to be accepted to this job and the most important thing is to show that you’re a disciplined man.”
P4	“My only advice to those individuals who are aspiring to be in the Philippine army, is to join with only pure intentions of serving the country, and not just because of the firearms that are going to be used.”
P5	“To those individuals who want to enter the military I hope you won’t do anything stupid. Always put inside your mind the hardships you had experienced to become an army.”

Building strong bonds with fellow soldiers is important, as unity and trust are essential for success in challenging missions. Encourage aspiring soldiers to foster a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood within their units, supporting and relying on one another during triumphs and hardships. Adaptability and resilience are needed, as military life often presents unpredictable and demanding circumstances (Oprins, 2018). Advise aspiring soldiers to develop a mindset that embraces change, thrives under pressure, and remains steadfast in the face of adversity.

4. Conclusion

We can conclude that military operations faced demanding circumstances, requiring them to be vigilant and collaborate while seeking protection through prayer. Although they encountered risks, many expressed gratitude for minimal casualties and the challenging nature of counterinsurgency deployments. Teamwork and unity were crucial during these deployments, with coordination and cooperation among soldiers playing essential roles in navigating hostile environments. The power of prayer and seeking guidance from a higher power gave them strength and protection. Unwavering dedication to their roles as soldiers in the Philippine army, driven by a deep sense of purpose. The commitment was fueled by the intrinsic motivation to fulfill their duties excellently and provide for their families. Families were a significant source of inspiration, striving to be good providers and protectors. Serving their country and fellow countrymen held great significance, viewing their roles as a means to contribute to the greater good and positively impact their nation. The casualties and injuries highlighted the

solemnity and gravity of armed conflicts, acknowledging their catastrophic effects on people and their families. It emphasized the psychological cost of losing friends and the long-term consequences of injuries received while performing official duties. Admiration and gratitude for the courage and tenacity exhibited by military men who selflessly risk their lives for the benefit of society. Soldiers faced difficulties maintaining contact with their families and loved ones during deployments due to limited communication means, distance, and separation. The impact of these challenges underscored the importance of treasuring moments of connection and the resilience required to endure the emotional strain of being apart from family for extended periods. Communication difficulties also affected soldiers' mental health, leaving them isolated. Reliance to conventional methods of communication, such as letters or telegrams, further emphasized the sporadic and delayed exchanges that soldiers experienced.

5. Recommendations

The researchers recommend enhancing communication infrastructure and providing reliable means of staying connected with families during deployments. Prioritizing mental health support is crucial, with comprehensive programs and resources to help soldiers cope with the emotional strain of separation. Thorough pre-deployment training and education should be provided, focusing on physical, mental, and spiritual preparedness and continuous learning. Cultivating unity and camaraderie among soldiers is essential, promoting teamwork and trust through joint training exercises and team-building initiatives. Aspiring soldiers should enter the military with a clear understanding of commitment and risks, driven by a genuine desire to serve their country and uphold ethical values. The importance of family and providing for loved ones is a strong motivation for dedication and commitment. Recognizing the sacrifices made by soldiers, support systems should be in place to address casualties, injuries, and their long-term consequences. Enhancing communication infrastructure and access to technology would alleviate the challenges of maintaining contact with families during deployments. Mental health support should be integrated into military programs to address the psychological toll of separation and combat-related stress. Strengthening pre-deployment training, fostering unity, and instilling a sense of purpose can shape aspiring soldiers into resilient and effective military personnel.

Declarations

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The study has not received any funds from any organization.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors have declared no competing interests.

Consent for Publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' Contributions

All the authors took part in literature review, research and manuscript writing equally.

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