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The Psychology of Shadow Soldiers: Resilience, Stress, and Psychological Operations in Covert Warfare

By: Samriddhi Manandhar, Schultz Fellow
Advised by: Dr. Jacob J. van den Berg

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Abstract

The psychological dimensions of covert warfare focus on the mental, emotional, and cognitive demands placed on the individuals in intelligence, special operations, and covert roles. Shadow soldiers, those who operate in secrecy, face unique challenges that separate them from standard military personnel. This project is structured around three central themes: (1) the psychological traits of operatives, (2) the mental health consequences and resilience strategies associated with covert missions, and (3) psychological warfare and its impact. Drawing on academic literature, established psychological operations (PSYOP) theory, real-world case studies, and emerging research in technology-driven warfare, this report provides an in-depth analysis of the hidden psychological burdens that shadow soldiers carry on and off the field. The findings highlight both the strength and vulnerability associated with covert operations and emphasize the need for comprehensive mental health support and ethical and legal oversight in the realm of psychological operations.

Introduction

When most people imagine war, they picture soldiers on open battlefields, weapons in hand, fighting an enemy they can see. Yet, beyond the visible front lines, there exists another kind of war, one fought in silence, in shadows, and often in solitude. We recognize those who carry this hidden burden: covert operatives. These shadow soldiers are tasked with missions that demand secrecy, deception, and sacrifice, often at the cost of their own peace of mind. They navigate worlds where truth and falsehood are intentionally blurred, where trust is fragile, and where the weight of their choices lingers long after a mission ends. For these operations, the battlefield is not only physical but also deeply psychological. They must develop extraordinary resilience to withstand isolation, moral ambiguity, and the knowledge that their contributions will rarely be acknowledged.

Their war is one of endurance, of carrying secrets too heavy to share, of balancing duty with conscience, and of protecting nations while often losing pieces of themselves in the process.

This report seeks to uncover the psychological dimensions of such hidden warfare. It is structured around three main themes: the personality and cognitive traits that shape covert operatives, the unique stressors and resilience factors that define their mental health, and the impact of psychological warfare. By understanding these dimensions, we move closer to recognizing not just the strategic value of covert soldiers but their humanity, their courage, their thought processes, their sacrifices, and the unseen costs of living in the shadows.

What are covert operations?

A covert operation is more than just a strategy; it is a step into the shadows. Covert operations are secret missions that are often planned by governments and are designed to shape political, economic, or military realities abroad while concealing the hand that pulls the strings (Hastedt, 2018). The defining feature of such operations centers on “plausible deniability,” the ability for a state to face the world and deny involvement, even when its fingerprints exist on the scene. Unlike clandestine operations, where secrecy hides the act itself, covert operations may play out in plain sight; what remains hidden is the true sponsor, the culprit (Lowenthal, 2020). For those who carry them out, covert operations are not only tactical but also deeply personal. Operatives live in a liminal space, where the truth of their actions can never be spoken, and where success is measured by silence rather than recognition.

Components of a Covert Operation

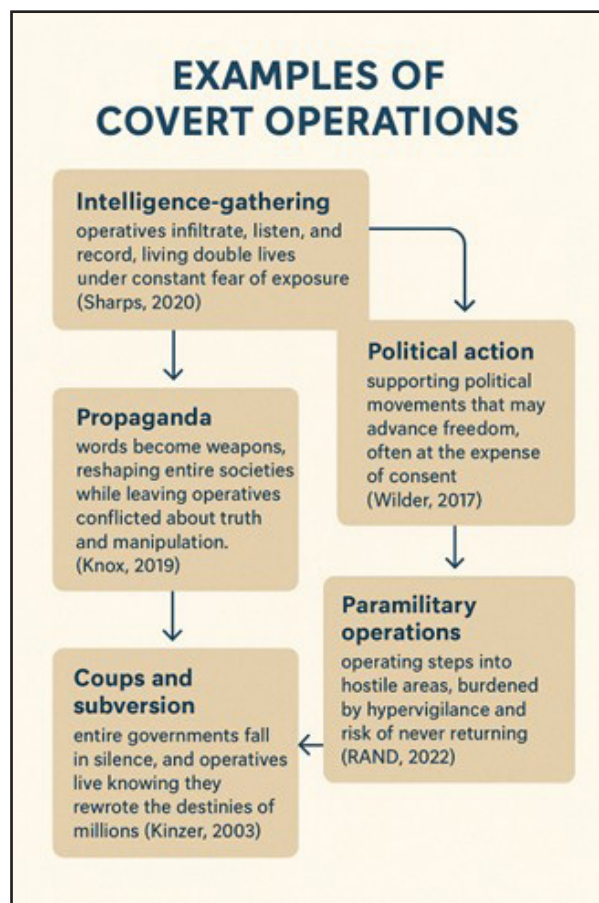
Concealed sponsorship — The need to hide the identity of the sponsor. This concealment gives political leaders the breathing room to act boldly without the chains of accountability (Warner, 2014). For operatives, however, this concealment often translates into a heavy psychological burden. Shaping the destiny of a foreign people, toppling a government, arming a militia, and spreading false rumors — while never being able to admit it — means living in a dark world of suppressed truth.

Influence and objectives — The goals of covert operations are rarely neutral. They are born from urgent needs: to sway elections, to weaken hostile regimes, to advance economic interests, or to protect allies (Johnson, 2017). Yet behind these objectives lie human consequences. A propaganda campaign can weaken communities, leaving families suspicious of each other. A covertly supported coup may change a nation's course, leaving scars that endure for generations. For the operatives involved, these outcomes create a conflict of conscience: their work serves the "greater good" as defined by the state, but at what cost to the people whose lives are reshaped?

Spectrum of activities — Covert operations cover a wide spectrum from intelligence-gathering and espionage to sabotage, disinformation, political manipulation, and paramilitary action (Hughes, 2016). Each form carries its own unique emotional toll on the operatives. Espionage demands trust built on lies, where friendships — even romantic relationships — may be formed solely to obtain secrets. Sabotage requires precision but also a willingness to destroy, often in unpredictable ways. Operatives might also have to be involved in a lot of violence, where they have to reconcile the state's hidden hand with the visible destruction it causes. In many scenarios, the human elements, like betrayal, guilt, loyalty, fear, etc., cut deeper than the mission briefings ever admit.

Distinction from clandestine operation — A clandestine operation is hidden in action; the act itself must remain unseen. A covert operation may unfold before the eyes of the world, but its sponsor remains invisible (Lowenthal, 2020). For operatives, the nature of secrecy shapes their psychological reality. In clandestine work, the challenge is hiding in the moment: remaining undetected, invisible. In covert work, the challenge lingers afterward: watching the world debate "who was behind this?" while knowing the answer can never be spoken.

Human reflections — History shows us the mechanics of covert operations, but rarely do we pause to consider the inner lives of those who serve in them. The men and women tasked with carrying out these missions walk a razor's edge between loyalty and secrecy. Their victories are buried in archives, their failures denied in press briefings. They live in silence, caught between pride in their service and the guilt of unseen consequences.



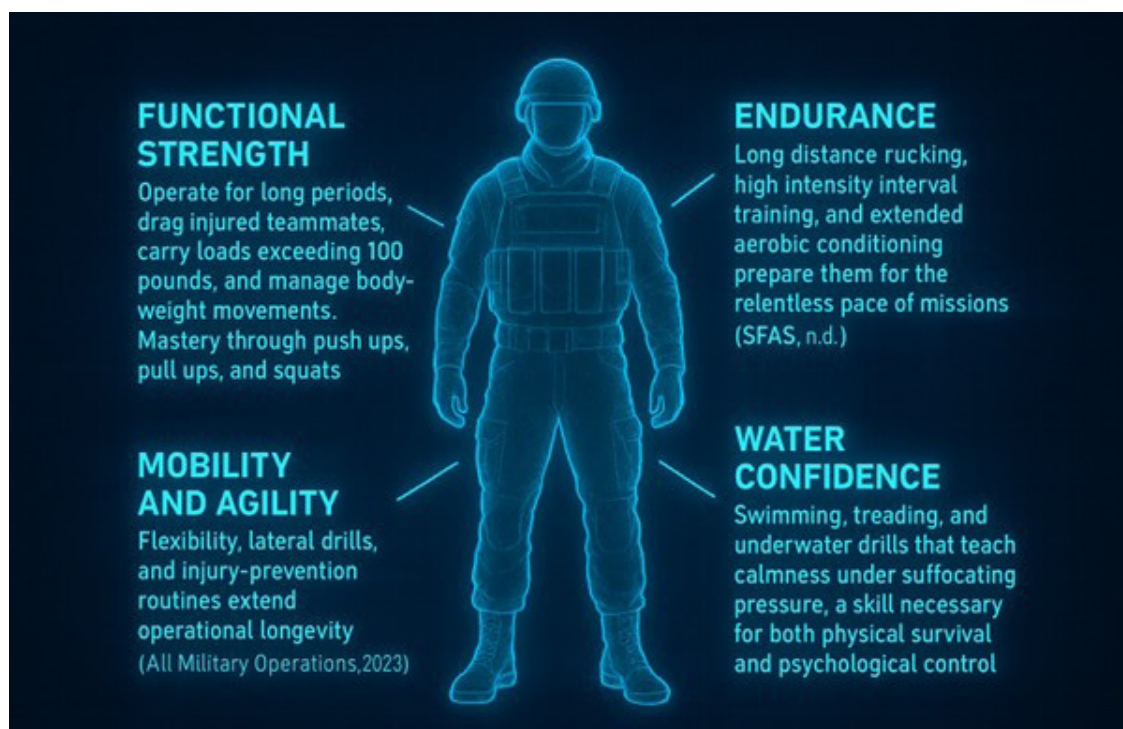
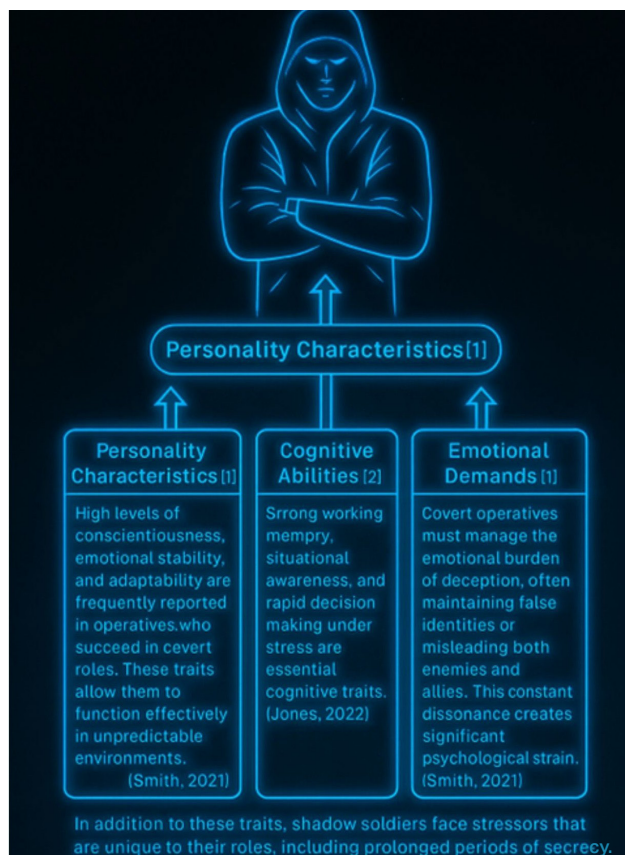
Psychological Traits of Shadow Operators

Shadow Soldiers: The Human Element Behind Covert Strength

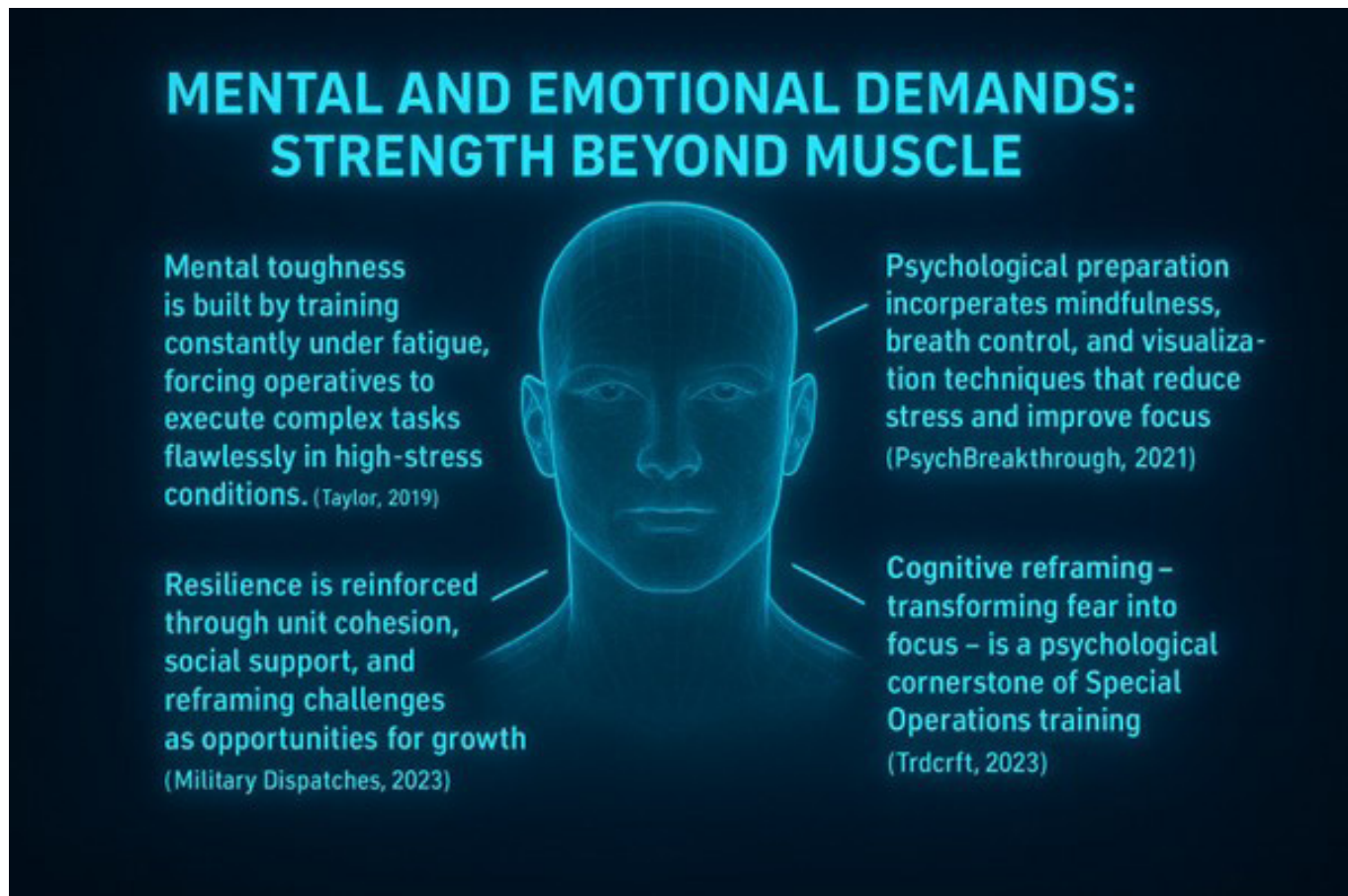
The term “shadow soldier” is not an official military title but a way to describe a Special Operations Forces (SOF) operative member who conducts high-risk, covert missions that often remain unseen and unacknowledged. Unlike ordinary soldiers, these operatives prepare through an extraordinary demand-led system that builds not only strength and endurance but also resilience and mental fortitude (U.S. Army Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS, n.d.). Shadow soldiers are selected and trained for their ability to operate under extreme pressure, often without external validation or recognition. These individuals typically share distinct personality traits and cognitive capacities that prove to be useful for the missions they have to carry out.

Physical demands: Building the hybrid athlete

For covert operators, fitness is not just about appearance but survival. They are trained as hybrid athletes, individuals capable of carrying heavy loads, moving swiftly across terrain, and performing under extreme stress (MilitarySaga, 2024).



While physical strength is essential, the greater challenge often lies in the mind. Shadow soldiers are conditioned to perform when exhausted, afraid, and morally conflicted.



Training philosophy: Prepared

The philosophy of SOF preparation is holistic. It begins with assessments that identify weaknesses, followed by tailored plans directly linked to operational demands such as land navigation and endurance. (Force Tactician, 2023). Training is not limited to physical and integrates tactical readiness, weapon proficiency, and survival skills, all layered on top of progressive conditioning that ensures steady, long-term development to promote adaptation to operational demands (USSOCOM, n.d.). The result is not just a stronger soldier but a resilient human being capable of bearing the physical and emotional weight of unseen wars.

Mental Health, Stress, and Resilience

The psychological costs of warfare are vast, often invisible, and carried in silence by the operatives themselves. Unlike conventional soldiers, shadow operatives cannot openly share the burdens of their missions. The secrecy of their work isolates them not only from society but also from the people they love. They come home with stories they cannot tell, wounds they cannot show, and memories they cannot share. The silent burden makes them uniquely vulnerable to stress, greater injury risk, and long-term mental health struggles (Williamson et al., 2021).

Secrecy and isolation

For covert operators, the burden of silence is both operational and personal. Prolonged concealment of missions and emotions prevents them from processing experiences with family or civilian support systems. Over time, the enforced silence creates emotional detachment, weakens relationships and intimacy, and leads to social withdrawal. Operators may appear physically present but emotionally absent, carrying a double life that people can't understand (Andres, 2019).

Moral conflict and injury

The deepest scars are those of moral conflict. In covert operations, deception is often a tactical necessity, yet it clashes with the personal values and beliefs of an individual. When operatives must mislead, manipulate, or take lives under questionable circumstances, they may experience moral injury, a wound to the conscience that produces guilt, shame, and spiritual distress (Litz et al., 2009). Unlike physical wounds, these injuries linger unseen, shaping how operatives see themselves long after the mission ends.

Operational uncertainty and stress

The nature of covert warfare is inherently unpredictable. Missions present fluid threats: dangers emerge suddenly, and failure can mean not only death but also political fallout. Constant uncertainty maintains a heightened state of vigilance — adaptive in the short term but over time, dysregulating to the nervous system, manifesting in chronic anxiety, hypervigilance, and in many cases, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Reynolds and Shapiro, 2021). Similar findings are reflected in drone operators, who, despite their physical distance, suffer high rates of burnout and PTSD due to the psychological toll of remote yet specifically targeted operations (Chamayou, 2015; Press, 2020).

Common coping mechanisms seen in covert operatives

When dealing with secret and dangerous tasks, there are many risk factors; operatives may see and do a lot of disturbing things that other normal people would have never imagined, even in their darkest nightmares, which can cause a lot of guilt and trauma. This is why having a way to “deal” with it becomes very important, not just for their own sanity but for their loved ones, too. Different operatives have different ways to cope with their work traumas, but many operatives rely on compartmentalization, distractions, humor, and peer support within their units to manage stress:

Resilience-building training programs emphasize psychological resilience, teaching operational stress-inoculation techniques, mindfulness, and mental toughness. These resilience strategies allow shadow soldiers to maintain functioning during missions but do not eliminate the long-term psychological costs



Despite these challenges, covert operatives are not without defenses. When operatives rely on compartmentalization, mentally separating the operational self from the personal self, they can sometimes lose their own sense of self. Even though that is somewhat the goal of the operations, it might be hard to switch after the mission's end. This can leave operatives with identity and existential crises. Others also lean on humor as a release valve in high-stress situations or draw strength from peer support within their units, where trust and shared experience form a unique brotherhood (Maguen and Burkman, 2013).

Military training also emphasizes resilience-building. Stress inoculation exercises, mindfulness practices, and resilience training are increasingly being included in special operations preparation. These techniques help operators regulate fear, sustain focus, and maintain composure during missions (Adler et al., 2015). However, while these methods preserve the functionality and sanity in the short term, they cannot erase the deeper, long-term consequences of living and fighting in the shadows for a long time.

Operational stress injury and long-term consequences

The Canadian Armed Forces introduced the concept of operational stress injury (OSI) to capture the spectrum of mental health injury sustained under extreme conditions. OSI deals with PTSD, moral injury, depression, and related conditions, framing them as wounds rather than weaknesses (Richardson et al., 2008). This reframing not only validates the struggle of covert operatives but also emphasizes that *resilience does not mean invulnerability*.

The lessons of history are deep in this understanding. During Cold War-era psychochemical experiments, subjects often experienced severe psychological effects, ranging from anxiety and depression to dissociation and trauma that lasted long after the exposure to them (Marks, 1991). These examples remind us that unseen warfare, whether psychological or chemical, leaves lasting marks on the human mind.

Psychological Warfare and Its Impact on Shadow Operatives

Definitions and Human Burden

Psychological warfare, known as psychological operations (PSYOP), is often defined as efforts to shape perception, alter belief, and guide behavior without firing a weapon (Department of Defense, 2010). But for the shadow operatives who carry out these missions, PSYOP is not just a theory; it is a lived reality that demands they enter into the fragile space of the human mind. They are tasked with manipulating emotions, amplifying fears, or planting seeds of doubt, while at the same time guarding themselves against the very psychological tools they deploy. This dual role places a profound emotional burden on operatives, who must balance mission success with the quiet erosion of their own psychological stability.

Theories and the Inner Conflict

Psychological theories can serve as a foundation for these operations, but they also highlight the emotional toll on those delivering them. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), often used to fracture enemy morale, also mirrors the inner conflict operatives face when their actions clash with personal values. Each time they use another's fears or cultural beliefs, they may feel the sting of dissonance within themselves. Similarly, inoculation theory (McGuire, 1961) has a paradoxical resonance with operatives' lives: while they design "psychological vaccines" to protect allies from enemy propaganda, they remain vulnerable to manipulation, disinformation, and their own moral doubts. In this sense, PSYOP does not simply influence the rival, but it reverberates back onto the operator's own psyche.

Strategies for Human Weight

- **Foundational strategies:** Military primers outline traditional tactics, including propaganda types — white (truthful), gray (ambiguous), and black (deceptive), designed to manipulate trust and sow confusion (Lasswell, 1971).
- **RAND research:** Analyses highlight how information warfare is increasingly digital, blending old tools like radio and pamphlets with modern disinformation and cyber campaigns (Paul & Matthews, 2016).
- **Technique-driven tactics:** From leaflet drops in World War II to social media “bot armies” in the 21st century, operatives harness fear, hope, humor, and even music to reach audiences emotionally (Pamment, 2016).
- **Cognitive warfare:** Emerging research highlights operations that target not just decisions but entire frameworks of thought using algorithms, emotive messaging, and AI-driven persuasion to subtly mold how societies interpret reality (Heath & Doyle, 2020).

Cognitive Warfare and Operative Vulnerability

Emerging fields such as cognitive warfare stress just how deep this struggle has become. These operations aim not only to influence decisions but to reshape how people interpret reality itself (Heath & Doyle, 2020). For operatives, engaging in such profound manipulation of human perception can be disorienting. They must constantly ask themselves where the line lies between strategy and harm, between patriotism and exploitation. Many carry these questions long after their missions end, often in silence, haunted by the awareness that in altering others’ minds, their own minds were changed as well.

Emerging Tech-Focused Research

The 21st century has transformed psychological warfare. Today’s operatives wield not only loudspeakers and leaflets but also algorithms, artificial intelligence, cyber tools, drones, and powerful instruments capable of reaching billions in seconds.

- **Deepfakes:** AI-generated videos can now mimic real people with frightening precision, spreading lies at lightning speed. For shadow operatives, using these tools is more than a technical challenge; it is an emotional one, a psychological one. A single “fake” video of a leader can destabilize nations while also leaving operatives questioning whether truth itself can survive in a world where “anything can be faked” (Chesney & Citron, 2019). This constant confrontation with unreality forces operatives into a state of high alertness that erodes trust even in authentic information. Here, the danger lies not only in believing the false but also in making the truth seem less truthful. After all, if anything can be faked, can anything be trusted?
- **Targeted influence operations:** With the rise of big data, operatives can now identify and exploit the most intimate fears, desires, and vulnerabilities of individuals. Unlike the broad propaganda campaigns of the past, like the crude leaflets of 1991, this is a scalpel, not a hammer, that are surgically precise and chillingly effective at exploiting vulnerabilities (Singer & Brooking, 2018). Today’s influence can directly reach into someone’s social media feed and scale globally. For shadow soldiers, this creates a dual strain: mastering these manipulative tools while guarding against the moral injury of knowing that they are playing with the deepest layers of human psychology.

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- **Cyber PSYOP:** Entire online ecosystems are now weaponized, merging disinformation, propaganda, and cyberattacks. For operatives on the front lines of these campaigns, the battlefield is everywhere, fluid, borderless, and deeply personal. Unlike traditional combat, the harm is often invisible: weakening communities, fracturing trust, and immersing both targets and operatives in a fog of uncertainty (Rid, 2020). Shadow soldiers live with the burden of fighting wars where the line between reality and illusion is blurred, often absorbing the same confusion they are asked to create.

Ethical and Legal Dimensions

With this power comes profound ethical responsibility and a heavy human cost.

- **Ethical Issues:** Manipulating deeply held beliefs, whether spiritual or cultural, risks crossing lines of dignity and humanity. While military leaders may argue that such tactics save lives by breaking enemy morale, they also inflict psychological harm that lingers long after wars end (Gross, 2010).
- **Legal Constraints:** International humanitarian law prohibits “perfidy” or acts of deception that betray trust, such as feigning surrender (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2021). Yet much psychological warfare exists in gray zones: what happens when persuasion, manipulation, and exploitation are not outright lies but carefully twisted truths?
- **Moral Injury for Operatives:** Finally, there is the burden borne by the shadow soldiers themselves. Those who carry out disinformation, create deception, or manipulate innocent populations may carry guilt long after their service ends. Some describe feeling stuck in a hidden kind of violence, one without blood, yet still deeply wounding (Shay, 2014). For many, the hardest battles are not fought against external enemies but within their own conscience.

Real-Life Case Studies

Case Study One

Richard Sorge (1905–1944) – Soviet Spy in WWII

Role: A German journalist who secretly worked as a Soviet intelligence officer in Japan during World War II.

Impact: He infiltrated German and Japanese circles, even befriendng the German ambassador in Tokyo. His intelligence warned Stalin of Hitler's invasion of the USSR and that Japan would not attack the Soviet Union in the east.

Psychological Dimension: Sorge lived a dual life for years, constantly under suspicion; the double life came with heavy burdens. He struggled with alcoholism and the paranoia of betrayal. Ultimately, he was arrested by Japanese authorities and executed in 1944 (Matthews, 2019). His story reflects the loneliness, deception, and stress shadow operatives endure. His case shows how operatives often cope with isolation through self-destructive habits.



Case Study Two

Virginia Hall (1906–1982) – OSS Agent, WWII

Role: An American working for the British SOE and later the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which was the United States' wartime intelligence agency during World War II. Despite a prosthetic leg (nicknamed "Cuthbert"), she organized resistance networks, sabotage, and intelligence networks in Nazi-occupied France.

Impact: She coordinated supply drops, trained resistance fighters, and passed critical intelligence to Allied forces.

Psychological Dimension: Hall lived under constant threat of capture by the Gestapo, who called her "the most dangerous Allied spy." Operating with a disability and in secrecy, she embodied resilience under extreme mental strain. Her resilience strategies included compartmentalization and strong interpersonal bonds with resistance fighters, which helped her under pressure. After the war, she lived quietly and avoided the spotlight, showing how some operatives could prefer to withdraw to preserve stability after prolonged secrecy (Purnell, 2019).



Real-Life Case Studies (continued)

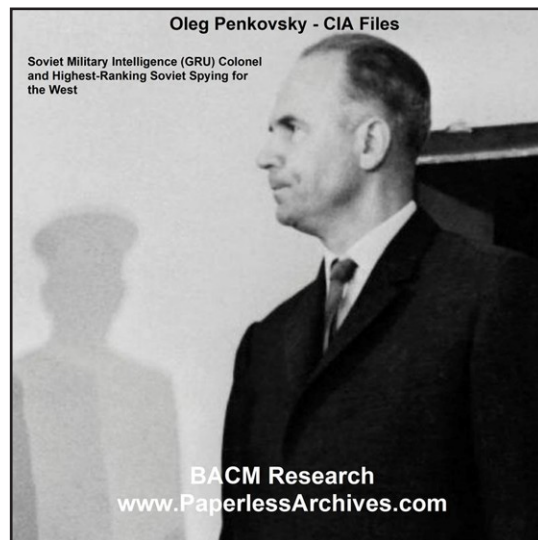
Case Study Three

Oleg Penkovsky (1919–1963) – Soviet GRU Colonel/Double Agent

Role: A high-ranking Soviet military intelligence officer who secretly provided critical intelligence to the UK's MI6 and the CIA during the Cold War.

Impact: His intelligence was pivotal during the Cuban Missile Crisis, giving the U.S. insight into Soviet missile capabilities.

Psychological Dimension: Penkovsky operated under constant fear of discovery. His skills in deception, interpersonal manipulation, and risk assessment helped him succeed, but his fear for his family's safety was constant. He knew exposure meant torture and death. His dual loyalty tormented him; he risked not only himself but also his family. He was eventually caught, tried, and executed in 1963. Penkovsky's story highlights the psychological toll of divided loyalties and the toughness of clashing personal values with covert obligations (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2000).



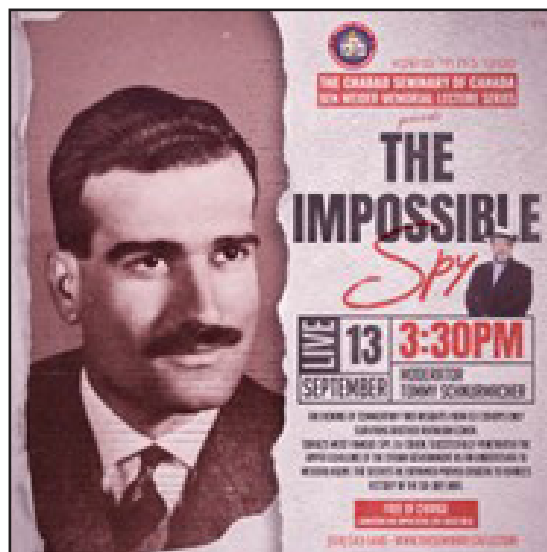
Case Study Four

Virginia Hall (1906–1982) – OSS Agent, WWII

Role: Cohen posed as a wealthy businessman in Damascus, embedding himself into Syria's political and military elite.

Impact: He gained access to Syria's top leadership and relayed intelligence that later gave Israel a decisive advantage in the Six-Day War.

Psychological Dimension: Cohen lived a constant double life, maintaining friendships with men he was betraying. He demonstrated remarkable social skills and emotional intelligence, embedding himself in Syria's elite. Yet in personal letters to his wife, he expressed exhaustion, loneliness, and guilt at betraying those who trusted him. He was later captured and executed, which left his family with lasting trauma, reflecting how the sacrifices of covert operative's ripple into their private lives (Segev, 2019). His story tells us the moral weight and psychological exhaustion of covert operations.



Case Study Five

Operation Phoenix Operatives – Vietnam War (1965–1972)

Role: A CIA-led program that recruited covert operatives to identify and neutralize Viet Cong infrastructure.

Impact: Tactics included infiltration, capture, and sometimes assassination of suspected Viet Cong operatives.

Psychological Dimension: During the Vietnam War, it was the darkest side of covert operations. While they were tactically effective in weakening Viet Cong networks, many U.S. and South Vietnamese operatives later reported moral injury, feelings of guilt, PTSD, and admitted that secrecy and violence from the program's violence haunted them long after the war. For many, coping meant silence, avoidance, or self-medication rather than open acknowledgment, which is why the aftereffects were seen long after the fighting ended (Valentine, 2000).



These case studies show that covert operatives rely on skills like deception, adaptability, and emotional regulation to survive missions. Yet once operations end, the long shadows of secrecy, betrayal, and moral conflict often lead to psychological scars ranging from withdrawal and isolation to trauma and guilt that resilience training alone cannot erase. These cases highlight how shadow soldiers and covert operatives live in constant ambiguity, balancing deception, loyalty, fear, and psychological strain. Many ended with capture, torture, or execution; others survived but carried the mental scars of secrecy and manipulation for life. The operatives were not the only ones who were affected; their family and loved ones were all deeply affected, too.

Interview Narrative

U.S. Marine, Private military contractor, mercenary (gets paid to assassinate people), combat medic

I've been asked many times what the toughest part of my work was, mentally, emotionally, and physically. The truth is, there wasn't just one thing. Everything weighed on you in different ways. My knees are blown out, and my back still aches from carrying gear that felt heavier with each mile, but the real battle was always in the mind. The mental game was relentless. Every day, I had to tell myself, you can do this; you must do this.

There was one mission that still burns into my memory. It was an anti-narcotics op in Colombia. We were sent to recover information about a missing reporter. I'll never forget the sight of her body strung up in the middle of the road, skinned, and left there as a warning. It wasn't just an operation at that point. It became something heavier. That image followed me for years, reminding me that the line between what we do and what we endure isn't always clear. But you don't stop; you train, you condition, and you prepare until it becomes part of life.

Bogotá nearly broke me. Fifty hours straight of operations with barely any time to breathe, no sleep, and no food worth eating. Everything blurred together. My body was screaming, but my mind couldn't stop. When you're in those moments, you don't think about what's moral or immoral; you think about survival, about your brothers beside you, about finishing the mission. Only later, when the adrenaline fades, does the weight of it start to crush you. Every rock I stepped on, every tree I passed, I felt the weight.

The secrecy of the job changes you in ways you don't expect. You start wearing masks, not just the literal black helmets that made us faceless and feared, but emotional masks. You can't talk about the things you've seen, so you bury them. Sometimes I like to go hiking while carrying a bag. I always thought of experiences and traumas like hiking with a 50-pound pack. Every rock, every tree, you feel the weight. And with trauma, it's the same. The bag either weighs you down and makes you weak until you collapse, or it becomes a useful tool by helping you carry things you need which makes you stronger if you learn to carry it. I see the traumas I have faced from these missions the same way. If you keep staying weak and let yourself give up because of the traumas, it will weigh you down, but if you use your emotions and use what you have learned in the missions, it will help you become stronger. Pain has a way of either crushing you or forging you into something harder (what the above image he took describes).

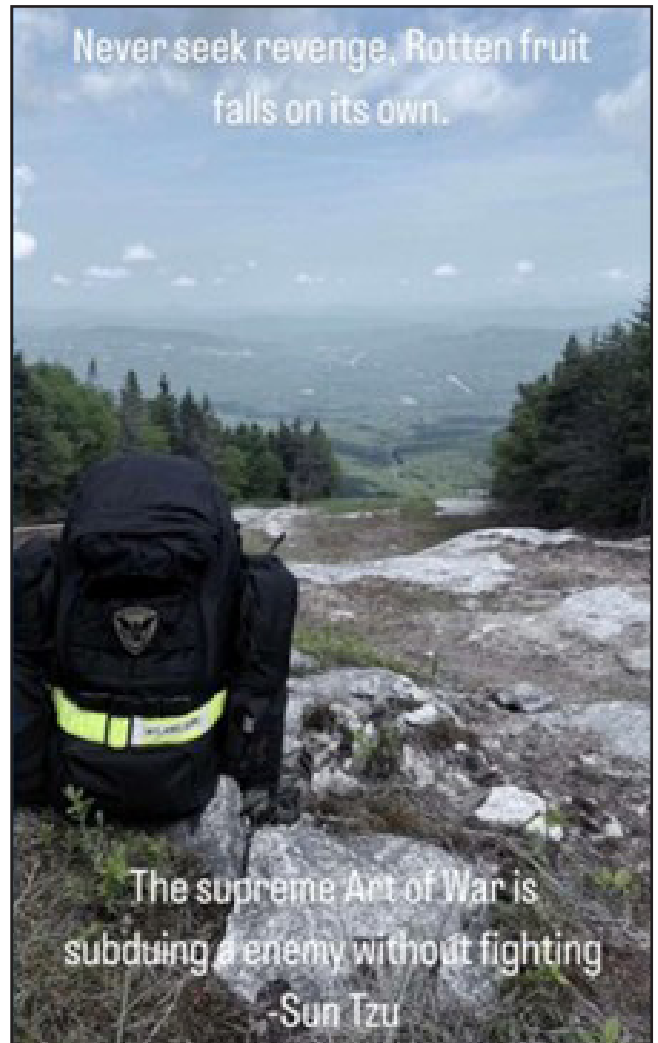


Photo Credit: Interviewee: reference to the 50 pound pack.

I guess what made me good at the job was endurance, and the ability to stay calm when things went sideways. Attention to detail, situational awareness, you notice the little things that others miss — sometimes to your benefit, sometimes to your torment. The training drilled it into me: breathe, think, act. Those instincts saved lives, but they also followed me home. Even now, I can't switch it off. I see everything: the angle of a door slightly ajar, a stranger's hand twitching near their pocket, and the sound of footsteps that don't match the rhythm of the street. Hypervigilance becomes your default setting.

Teamwork was the backbone of everything. We didn't always need words, just a glance, a hand signal, or a slight shift in posture, and your teammate would know what you are trying to say; they would know what you are feeling and if we are to proceed with caution. Under pressure, we became like diamonds, forged tighter, stronger. Trust was sacred; without it, you wouldn't last a day. If it cracked, lives were lost. We walked like one body, one mind. That kind of bond is rare, and I'll carry it with me forever.

But the moral lines... those stay with you. There were moments I crossed them, moments that haunt me. Sometimes you justify it — it was necessary, it saved lives — but at night, in silence, those justifications echo back hollow. Guilt isn't permanent, but it comes in waves, and you either let it drown you or you learn to surface again.

During long deployments, I built small rituals. Cleaning my rifle with deliberate care. Writing short notes, I'd never send. Simple routines that grounded me when everything else was chaos. We didn't have mental health support, not in any real way. Maybe it would have helped, maybe not. Seeking it out could end your career and disqualify you, and none of us were willing to risk that. So you put a lid on it, hoping the pressure wouldn't explode.

Psychological operations were a part of my world, too. I saw how fear could be weaponized, how images, words, and silence could break a man just as effectively as bullets. Wearing the black mask and projecting fear wasn't just for them; it was for us, too. The mask kept me safe and gave me distance. But after years of deception and counterintelligence, trust becomes complicated. You start seeing everyone as a potential lie, and even in civilian life, it's hard to shake that.

Coming back was its own war. The hardest part wasn't the physical injuries; it was learning how to be around people again. How to explain a past you can't really talk about, how to answer questions without opening wounds you've spent years stitching shut. There are things you can't explain to someone who hasn't lived it, so you stay silent. But that silence... it creates distance. Relationships wear away under it.

If there's one thing I wish people understood, it's that working in the shadows isn't just about secrecy: it's about sacrifice. You give up pieces of yourself that you may never get back. Future leaders and future generations need to know it's not just strategy and missions. It's human beings carrying invisible weights. We did what we had to do, but the burden doesn't end when the mission does.

As I've learned: Acta non verba. Deeds, not words. It's not the place; it's the decision that defines you. And sometimes the hardest battles are the ones fought quietly, inside yourself.

Conclusion

The hidden world of shadow soldiers reminds us that behind every covert mission is a human being carrying invisible burdens. These operatives live in secrecy, often cut off from the recognition or support that regular soldiers receive. Their strength, adaptability, and resilience allow them to face impossible situations, but those same qualities come at a high cost. The weight of secrecy, the strain of deception, and the moral injuries from difficult choices they were given often leave scars that no amount of training can fully erase.

Real-life cases of psychological operations show both the power and danger of these methods, not only in how they shape the battlefield but also in how they echo inside the minds of those who carry them out. Today, with technology making psychological warfare more powerful and more personal, the stakes are higher than ever. This is why we cannot ignore the urgent need for stronger ethical safeguards and genuine mental health support.

This project, grounded in both research and the voices of brave soldiers from the past, shines a light on those who work in the shadows. It honors their resilience for carrying out their missions no matter what, even in the toughest situations, while also acknowledging that they are still human with vulnerabilities. In doing so, it calls for a future where shadow soldiers are not left alone with their burdens but are supported, understood, and recognized for the sacrifices they make in silence.

This project, grounded in research and in the lived realities of these operatives, seeks to pull back the curtain on a life of secrecy. It honors their resilience, their courage, and their ability to endure where most could not. Yet it also insists on a truth that is too often forgotten: shadow soldiers are human. They bleed, they fear, they hope, and they suffer. To honor their sacrifices means not only recognizing their missions but also offering them the care, understanding, and dignity they deserve. In doing so, we can build a future where no soldier remains lost in the silence of their burdens but instead finds support and healing and is acknowledged for the sacrifices they make in the quietest corners of history.



Photo Credit: Interviewee.

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Interviewee

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And Lastly, To all the Brave Warriors,

Thank you for fighting the battles no one sees, for your contributions and sacrifices.
Thank you for serving.

Glossary

GRU Colonel — high-ranking officer in the GRU (Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye), which is Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate, the military intelligence agency of the Russian Armed Forces.

The UK's M16 — Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), which is the United Kingdom's foreign intelligence agency.

Notes

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The Richard S. Schultz '60 Symposium Fellowship was established in 2017 as an endowed fund in honor of "Dick" by his wife of fifty years, Myrna L. Schultz, their children, Marni and Alan, and his classmates and friends.

The fellowship enables Norwich undergraduates, from any academic discipline, the opportunity to pursue areas of inquiry and experiences that will promote and expand their understanding of the past and how it impacts the present and future. Through research, travel, and inquiry the Schultz Fellow and faculty advisor will offer perspectives for us to face the future with better understanding and confidence.

After a wide solicitation and competitive selection process, this annual fellowship is granted by the Norwich University Peace & War Center to an undergraduate student for a single project that may involve additional Norwich undergraduate students. The award includes a \$3,500 grant.



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