

# **SAF Tsunami Relief Mission: Troops Experience and Feedback for Organisational Learning**

*Stephanie Phang*

*Toong Hui Lynn*

*Applied Behavioural Sciences Department*

*Ministry of Defence, Singapore*

*stephani@starnet.gov.sg*

## **Abstract**

A large-scale humanitarian assistance force was deployed to Tsunami-hit Indonesia for disaster relief. Being the first of its kind for the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), there was a need to understand the factors underlying operational effectiveness and issues that impact our troops' experience in such a mission. This understanding forms part of the SAF's drive to continually improve and learn from her experiences. To this end, a 48-item survey was administered to troops returning from their mission. This paper presents the framework underlying the design of the survey which included four key outcomes of interest – Experience, Confidence, Commitment and Willingness to volunteer for future similar operations. It was hypothesized that pre-deployment factors and day-to-day aspects during the mission will have an impact on the four outcomes. This paper concludes with the findings of key contributors to a positive experience and recommendations on how to improve future similar operations.

## **Introduction**

Providing Humanitarian assistance to Tsunami-hit Indonesia was a first of its kind for the Singapore Armed Forces. Being a country that has never experienced natural disasters of any kind, exposure to such massive destruction and the task of providing humanitarian relief on such a scale was a first for our troops. The short notice given for the large-scale deployment meant that all three services (Army, Navy and Airforce) had to work closely to ensure the success of the mission. To facilitate organisational learning from these new experiences, there was a need to understand what were some of the factors that might impact upon troops' readiness and experience and thereafter to feedback these findings to higher HQ.

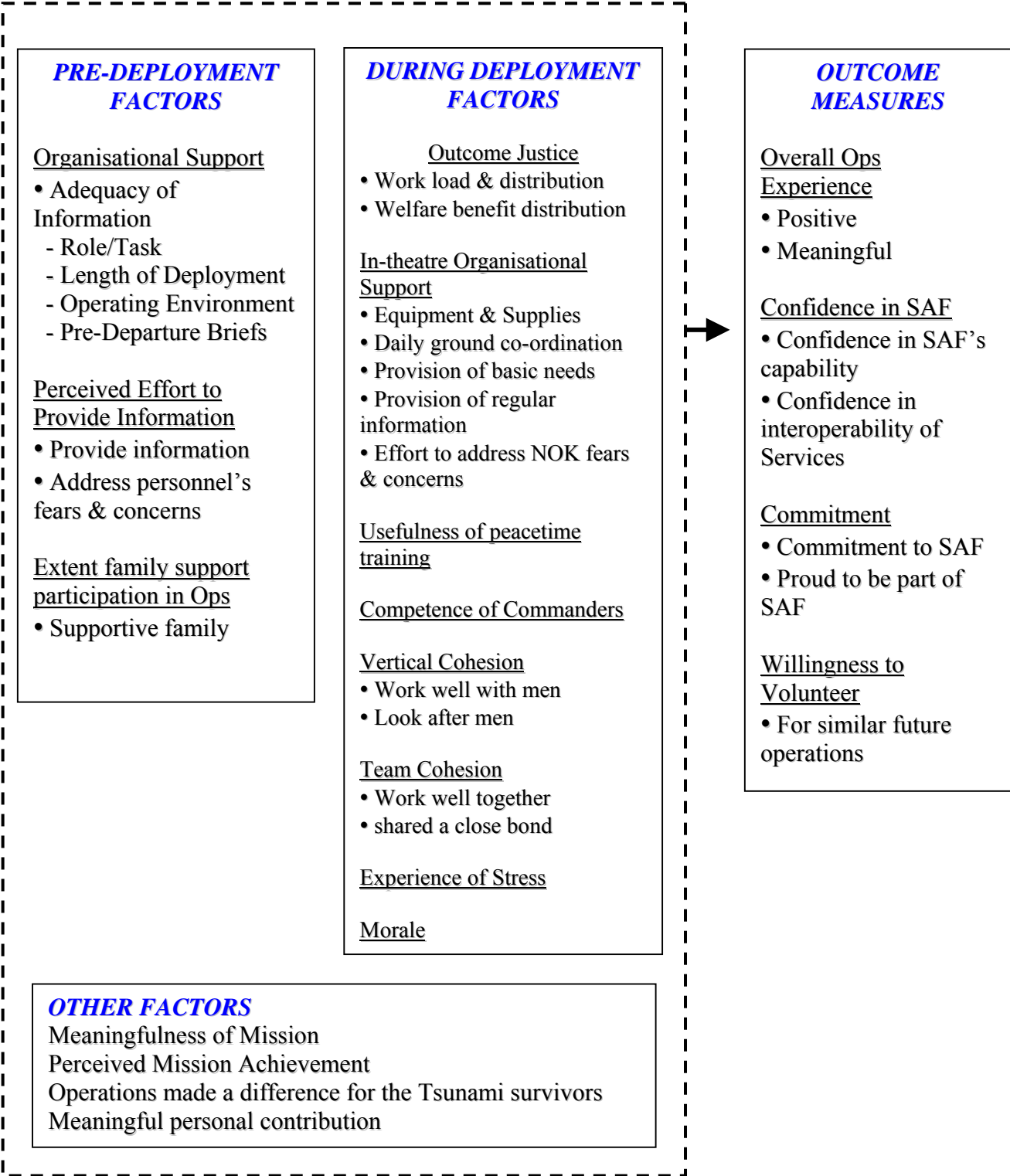
## **Post-Mission Survey**

To achieve the above-mentioned aim, the Applied Behavioural Sciences Department engaged in the design of a Post-mission Survey to capture troops' perceptions of various aspects of the mission. The main aim of this Survey was two-fold. Firstly, the survey sought to understand the factors that would affect key readiness indicators such as morale, confidence and commitment. Secondly, the survey sought to capture the perceptions troops had of their experience and gather feedback on areas for improvement.

The mission was essentially divided into two phases: Pre-deployment and During Deployment Phase. Factors of interests were identified from past research which the literature had highlighted as being important to readiness. These included factors such as organisational and family support, meaningfulness of mission. We also received feedback from our field psychologist in-theatre who updated us on the troops' concerns whilst in deployment. Some of these factors included outcome justice indicators such as work load distribution, coordination

between services. We were interested in how these factors affected four outcome measures of Overall Positiveness & Meaningfulness of Experience, Confidence, Commitment and the Willingness to Volunteer for Similar Future Ops. Figure 1 below presents the survey framework on which the design of the survey items were based.

Figure 1 Survey Framework



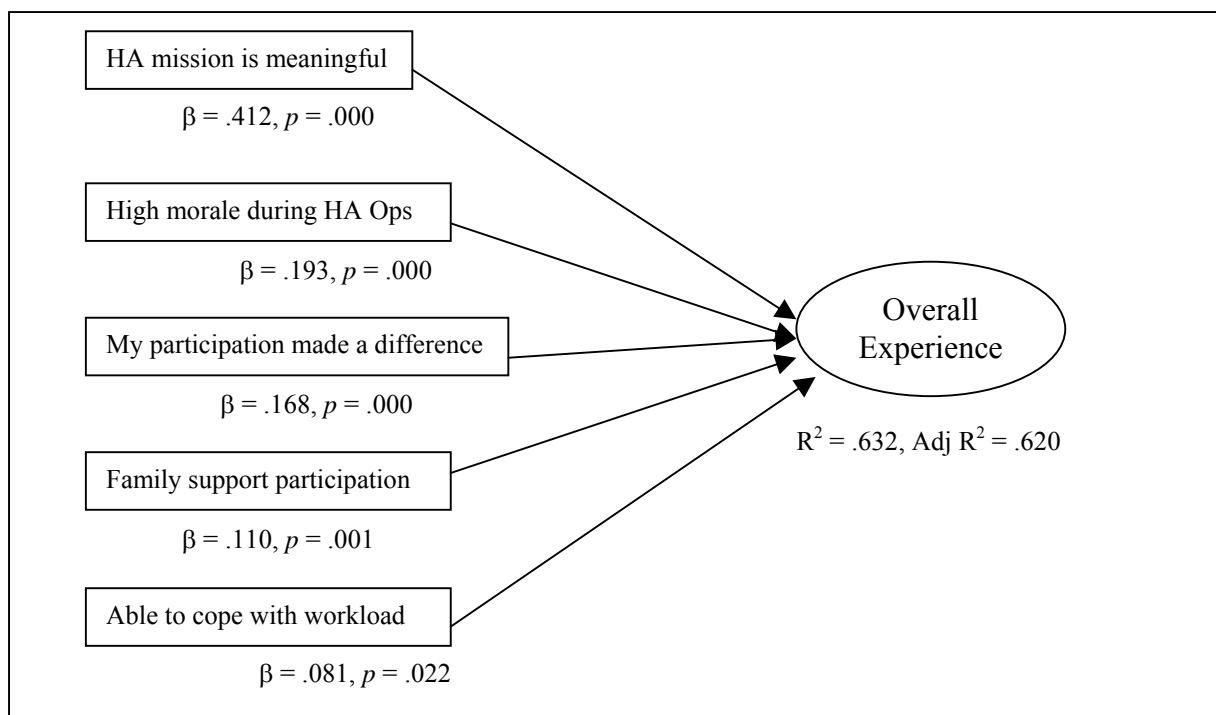
## Method

A total of 673 servicemen whose main area of operations was in Meulaboh, Indonesia completed the 48-item survey. The survey was administered to servicemen onboard the returning LST or in-theatre prior to their departure home. A series of regression analyses were carried out to investigate the relationships between the factors and the outcome measures.

## Findings

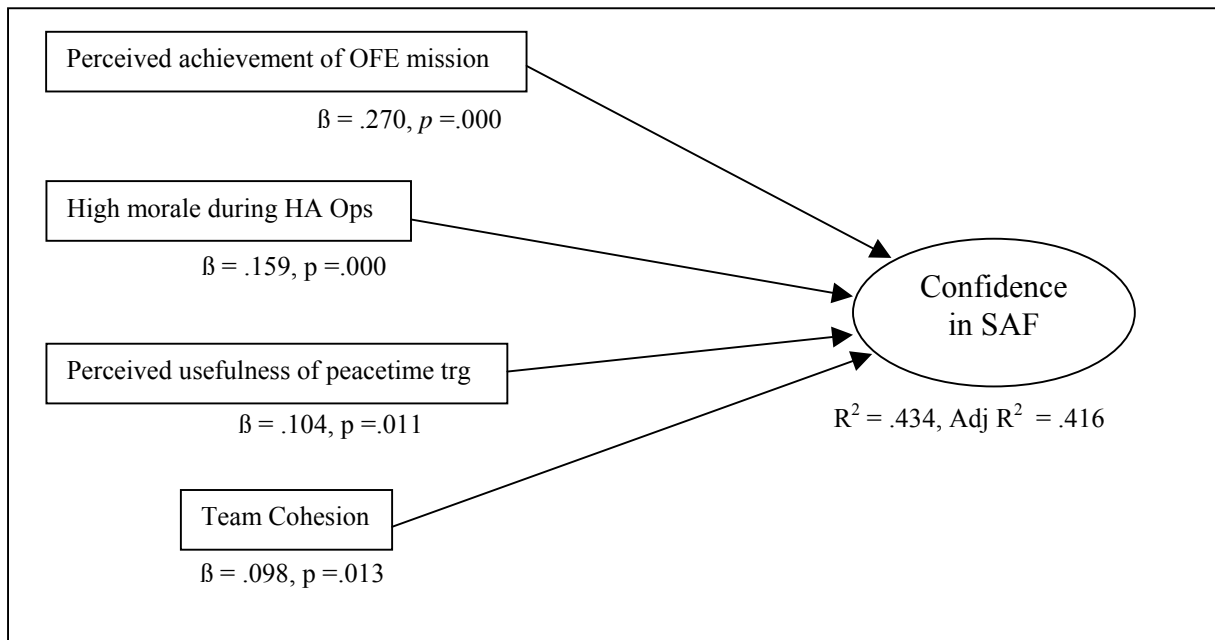
The results suggest that the perceived meaningfulness of the mission ( $\beta = .412, p = .000$ ) and knowing that one's participation had made a difference to the survivors ( $\beta = .168, p = .000$ ) of the Tsunami was key to having a **positive experience**. Having their family support their participation in the mission ( $\beta = .110, p = .001$ ) also contributed to their positive experience as troops were probably able to concentrate on their tasks at hand and not having to worry about their family. The above factors including the ability to cope with the workload and morale contributed to 62% of the variance in troops' Overall Experience (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Factors relating to Overall Experience



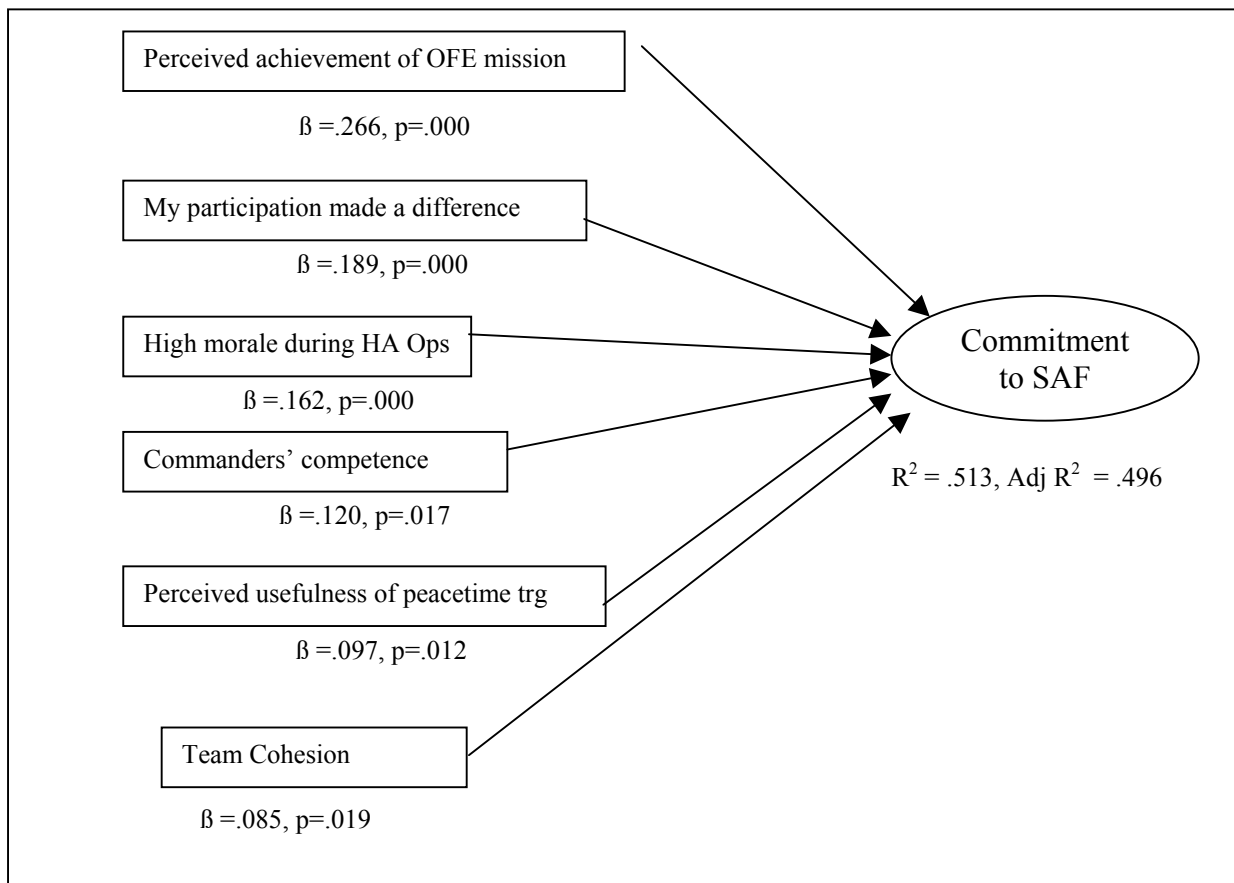
The feeling of mission achievement, troops' perceptions of the usefulness of their peacetime training in accomplishing their assigned tasks, team cohesion and morale contributed to 42% of the total variance in their **Confidence in the SAF's ability** to be ready for operations at all times (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3 Factors relating to Confidence in SAF**



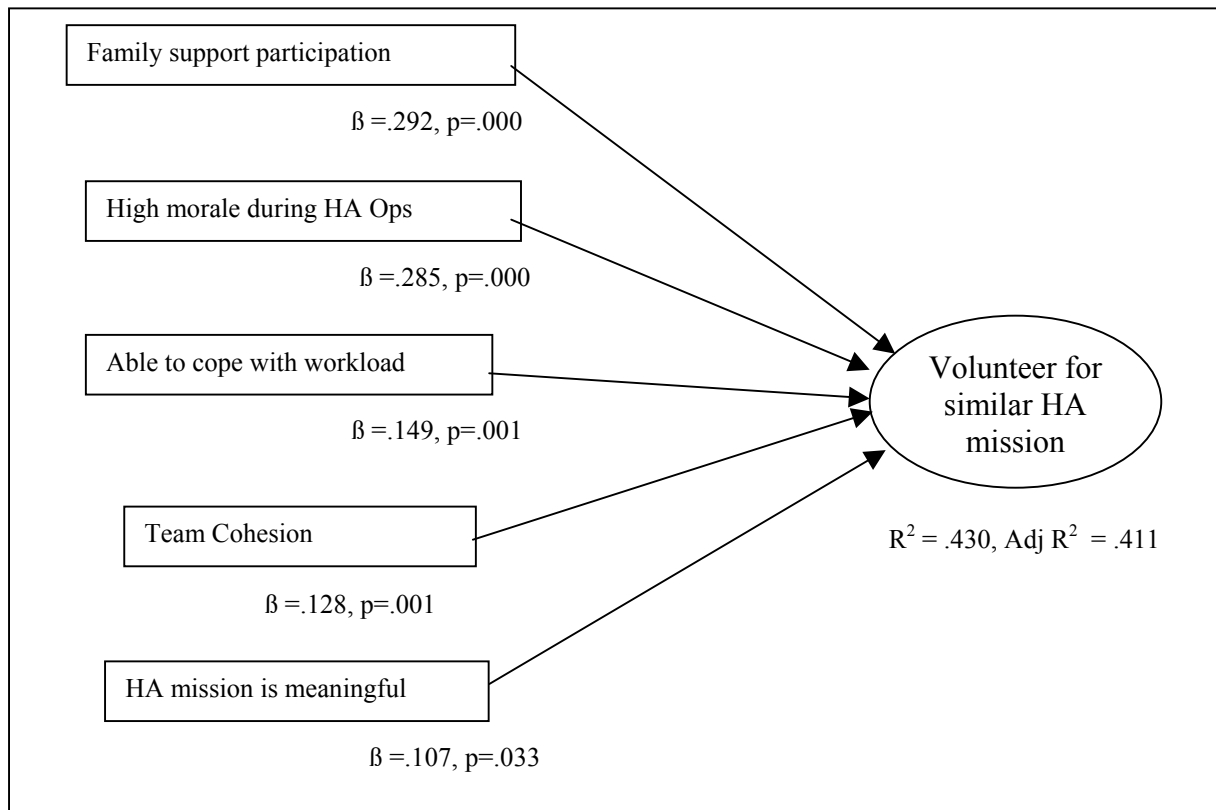
Similarly, troops' **Commitment to SAF** was also affected by their perceived achievement of the mission ( $\beta = .266, p = .000$ ) and the perception that their participation had made a difference for the survivors ( $\beta = .189, p = .000$ ). In addition, troops who felt that they had competent commanders ( $\beta = .120, p = .017$ ) tend to feel more committed to the SAF as compared to troops who did not. The variance accounted for by these factors together with the perceived usefulness of their peacetime training, team cohesion and high morale was 50% (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4 Factors relating to Commitment to SAF**



Analysis also revealed that family support ( $\beta = .292, p = .000$ ) was an important factor in determining troops' future **willingness to volunteer for similar Humanitarian Assistance missions**. Troops perceptions of their experience in the present mission such as the camaraderie experienced (horizontal cohesion,  $\beta = .128, p = .000$ ), perceived ability to cope with their workload ( $\beta = .149, p = .000$ ) and the meaningfulness of the mission ( $\beta = .107, p = .033$ ) also contributed to their willingness to volunteer for future similar missions. These factors together with morale, accounted for 41% of the variance in troops' willingness to volunteer for future similar missions (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Factors relating to Willingness to Volunteer for Future Similar Missions



### Recommendations for Future Ops

Although the study was retrospective in design, the findings above still reiterates the importance of the role of commanders for Future Ops. Commanders are instrumental in shaping their men's perceptions. Commanders who are able to foster and reinforce a belief in the cause of the mission, facilitate their men's perceived importance of their contributions and manage the morale of their men well will go a long way in enhancing their troops' positive operational experience.

Further, troops' perceived operational readiness was influenced by the extent to which they perceived their peacetime training to be useful. Hence, the adequacy and relevance of training should be emphasised in peacetime.

To secure troops' willingness to volunteer for future operations, their families should not be neglected. Even in the urgency to deploy, providing troops with information on how to prepare their families for the separation will help their loved ones cope better with the deployment.