

Trauma doesn't build resilience – Reforming CAC training

By Damien de Pyle

The responses to Joey Watson and Christopher Knaus's article, '[Australian soldier alleges torture survival course involved simulated child rape and left him with PTSD](#)' in the Guardian were overall mixed. I found that a large number of people were horrified by my account of what happened to me on my Conduct After Capture (CAC) course and saw the need for reform. However, there were also two other main responses I saw from readers. The first was that these allegations didn't actually happen and that it is typical media sensationalism, an attack on Defence from a Left-wing media organization, or some other reason for why the allegations don't seem believable. The other response was the most popular, which is that this training requires extreme stressors to be effective at training defence personnel for the horrors of war. We won't be effective at resisting actual torture from enemy captors if we ourselves don't also go through torture.

The purpose of this paper is not to address the sceptical responses about whether these allegations really happened. I believe that once this case goes to the federal court the matters will be proven there. Instead, I want to address these questions around making sure CAC training is effective at training soldiers to resist the numerous horrors of potential captivity.

The Department of Defence says that the purpose of CAC training is to prepare "*ADF personnel to understand the rigors of captivity and exploitation while surviving the capture situation with dignity.*"¹ The Defence Force School of Intelligence describes the purpose of Level C training as exposing, "*participants to a range of CAC scenarios IOT enable the demonstration the CAC training learning outcomes. (sic)*"² However, neither of these descriptions gives a practical purpose for the training so I will offer my own interpretation based on these previous ones. From my understanding, the purpose of CAC training is to:

1. In Levels A and B, teach participants potential interrogation and exploitation techniques that may be used by an enemy captor and the procedures to counter or resist those techniques.
2. In Level C, provide realistic scenarios for participants to test those counter-interrogation/counter-exploitation techniques.
3. The overall outcome is that participants will be less vulnerable to exploitation and interrogation in the unlikely scenario they are captured by enemy personnel.

I believe that this form of training is important and necessary for the functioning of any Army. There have been some people who have publicly said that this course shouldn't exist and should be scrapped altogether. I don't agree with their position, and I think the Army would be worse off if this course is scrapped. Instead, I want to analyse if subjecting soldiers to torture and dehumanising techniques actually supports purpose 3 of the training or whether it is actually contrary to making participants less vulnerable. My argument is that torture and dehumanising techniques can (and often do) cause trauma which makes someone more vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, the CAC

¹ <https://www.defence.gov.au/adf-members-families/health-well-being/rti-cac-training-support-services>

² Defence Force School of Intelligence, *Administrative Instruction - Conduct After Capture Level C Activity*, 2018/1148056

Level C training shouldn't replicate techniques that can cause trauma since it would be counter-productive to purpose 3 of the CAC training.

Torture and dehumanisation techniques

Trauma as defined by the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) is, "*an event or situation (either short- or long-lasting) of an extremely threatening or horrific nature.*"³ The ICD-11 gives the following examples of traumatic events or situations, "*Such events include, but are not limited to, directly experiencing natural or human-made disasters, combat, serious accidents, **torture**, sexual violence, terrorism, assault or acute life-threatening illness (e.g., a heart attack); witnessing the threatened or actual injury or death of others in a sudden, unexpected, or violent manner; and learning about the sudden, unexpected or violent death of a loved one.*"⁴

From the examples the ICD-11 gives, it is clear that torture can cause trauma. However, what about dehumanisation techniques? Dehumanisation techniques are not so clear since there is a wide range of potential dehumanisation techniques. However, if such techniques involve sexual violence or physical assault, as Evan Donaldson alleges happened to him, then they very well can cause trauma according to the ICD-11 examples. Dehumanising techniques can also cause moral injury (a nondanger-based trauma)⁵ since it can force participants to do actions that are contrary to their deeply held beliefs, as I allege happened in my case.

It is clear then that both torture and dehumanisation techniques can cause trauma. There are several reasons why deliberately causing trauma in the CAC course is wrong. However, the main reason we are looking at here is that trauma makes people more psychologically vulnerable to exploitation. Yu Mou, in analysing Chinese police officers and their interrogation techniques, found that China had a history of what was called 'thought reform campaigns' which included exploiting psychological vulnerabilities to turn a person against their old self.⁶ Clearly, if your country traumatised you as a part of training, this is an easily exploitable vulnerability to turn a person against the country that caused that trauma. It makes no sense then to purposefully inflict trauma upon participants because it would undermine the goal of making them less vulnerable to exploitation.

However, while this argument makes it clear that causing trauma through torture and dehumanisation techniques is counter-productive, there are still some important objections I will anticipate and respond to. The first is that torture and dehumanisation techniques are used by foreign governments and terrorist organisations, unless participants are able to experience these techniques first-hand, they'll be unable to properly assess the techniques being used and implement the correct strategies learnt to resist those techniques. However, there are several problems with this objection. The first is that first-hand experience is not necessary for you to be able to know what to do in a certain situation. We don't require that everyone who is learning how to drive get into a car accident so that they know first-hand what they need to do if that happens. People can know

³ <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http%253a%252f%252fid.who.int%252fid%252fentity%252f2070699808>

⁴ Ibid, emphasis mine.

⁵ Barnes, H. A., Hurley, R. A., & Taber, K. H. (2019). Moral Injury and PTSD: Often Co-Occurring Yet Mechanistically Different. *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 31(2), A4–103. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.neuropsych.19020036>

⁶ Yu Mou, Techniques To Exploit Vulnerabilities: Persuasion And Education In Chinese Police Interrogations, *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume 62, Issue 3, May 2022, Pages 734–750, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab095>

that there are certain steps you need to do if you ever get into a car accident like exchanging insurance information, taking pictures of the damage and surrounding area, etc. The same is true for torture and dehumanisation techniques. The techniques and resistance strategies are taught in Levels A and B, so they don't need to go through the techniques themselves to know what to do.

Someone might object and say that torture and dehumanisation techniques require a certain level of resilience that can't be taught in a classroom, instead, it requires first-hand experience to develop this kind of resilience. However, this objection has a couple of problems. The first is that trauma doesn't build resilience. If these techniques can cause trauma, then it seems that far from making someone more resilient, it could actually leave them more vulnerable. The second problem with this argument is that it assumes that the CAC level C course is the only time someone in the Army will learn and develop resilience. Most people who do the CAC Level C course are already well-trained soldiers who have gone through extremely difficult and fatiguing training which has already built a high level of resilience in the individual. There is no need for some special torture resilience training in the CAC course since soldiers develop resilience elsewhere in safer environments.

The final objection I'll address is that these techniques when they are experienced first-hand provide opportunities for more learning than what is offered in a classroom environment. However, the main problem with this argument is that sleep deprivation makes it extremely difficult to learn anything. Meta-studies on the effects of sleep deprivation and learning found that sleep deprivation of 24-48 hours or more has significant detrimental effects on learning regardless of whether it happened before or after the learning.⁷ Level C is not meant for participants to learn anything new, as I mentioned in purpose 2 of the CAC training. It's only meant to provide scenarios for participants to test the strategies they have already learned.

Reforms to the Course

As a part of my complaint to the Australian Human Rights Commission about this course, I have recommended certain structural reforms to the course that would hopefully make the course more humane and effective.

The first of my reforms is to limit the amount of sleep deprivation on the course to 48 hours. This brings the course in line with the equivalent training being done in the UK which also has this same limit. This allows for greater learning to be done on the Level B course which is run before the Level C course, and it prevents the symptoms of acute psychosis which arise from prolonged sleep deprivation.⁸

The second reform is to address a concern raised by Dr Steven Scully in his submission to the 2017 Senate Inquiry into the course. He was concerned that psychologists and medical officers may be prevented from putting the welfare of participants first if they were still a member of the Army and had to comply with the Army hierarchy. This concern leads me to recommend that being a monitoring psychologist on the course becomes a position chosen by the Australian Psychological Society, or The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, subject to security vetting

⁷ Newbury, C. R., Crowley, R., Rastle, K., & Tamminen, J. (2021). Sleep deprivation and memory: Meta-analytic reviews of studies on sleep deprivation before and after learning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 147(11), 1215–1240. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000348>

⁸ Waters F, Chiu V, Atkinson A, Blom JD. Severe Sleep Deprivation Causes Hallucinations and a Gradual Progression Toward Psychosis With Increasing Time Awake. *Front Psychiatry*. 2018 Jul 10;9:303. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2018.00303.

by AGSVA. Psychologists will also be able to act anonymously in recommending the withdrawal of participants. This greater safeguard will allow the course to be effective at preventing trauma as stressors that could cause trauma can be vetoed by the monitoring psychologists if they believe that the technique will be contrary to ethical guidelines and purpose 3 of the training.

The third reform is to stop the use of techniques and/or stressors that could cause moral injury or trauma. I think this reform is pretty self-explanatory.

In conclusion, I believe that this course needs to happen because it serves an important role in preparing our soldiers for potential captivity. However, the use of torture and dehumanisation techniques in Level C training needs to stop not just for the future psychological welfare of participants but also for the training to be more effective.