

Excess baggage downgrades Danish warriors

Rupert Pengelley

Key Points

- Heavy weights on operations are causing lasting injury to Danish soldiers
- Immediate measures suggested include improved training methods and forward basing of physiotherapists

The carrying of excessive weight on operational tours in Afghanistan, where individual loads of up to 70 kg are not uncommon, is resulting in 10-15 per cent of the infantry soldiers serving with the 750-strong Danish battle group incurring lasting disability.

Speaking at the WBR Soldier Technology 2009 conference in London, Colonel Eigil Schjønnig, Commander of the Danish Army Combat Centre, noted that while 10-15 per cent of soldiers suffered from residual injuries post-tour, the number affected by excess weight while on tour was closer to 50 per cent. He told delegates that observation of Danish battle group personnel in theatre showed that many subsisted on painkillers in order to complete their missions. The current experience is reinforcing the importance of ensuring that soldiers in the field do not become loaded with surplus or ineffective equipment, a key goal of the many established soldier system modernisation programmes.

Appropriate medical treatment has hitherto generally only been available to Danish soldiers before or after their operational tours. A near-term recommendation by the Danish Army Combat Centre is that the physical training regime for Danish Army recruits be redesigned, the present 12-month period of training and conditioning to reach operational readiness being insufficient in Col Schjønnig's view. Another is that physiotherapists should be deployed not just in field hospitals but in the forward operating bases, where the soldiers could be given routine guidance and restorative treatment in rest periods between patrols.

It is already Danish Army practice to contract volunteer (civil) paramedics, who are sent into the field to act as combat medics at platoon or section level after having received a basic military training course. To meet the emerging need, a similar recruitment approach might be adopted with civilian physiotherapists.