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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Beyond the Bullet Proof Vest: Untold Stories of Philippine National Police Special Action Force (PNP SAF) Commandos

Peter Jun T. Elgario

Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, Security Agent 1, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas – Naga Branch, Naga City, Philippines

**Corresponding Author:** Peter Jun T. Elgario, **E-mail:** [epeterjun@gmail.com](mailto:epeterjun@gmail.com)

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| ABSTRACT

The ever-changing demographics of society, the rise in terrorism and its complexity, as well as agitations, violent protests, a variety of political activities, left-wing terrorism, insurgency, and militancy, as well as the enforcement of economic and social laws, have all contributed to the difficulty of achieving the peaceful society that we all desire. This study explored the lived experiences of Philippine National Police-Special Action Force (PNP-SAF) Commandos in Negros Island, Philippines through a qualitative research method. The participants of this study were the selected ten (10) PNP-SAF commandos. Four (4) participants were subjected to individual in-depth interviews, while the other six (6) participants were subjected to a focus group discussion. The findings of this study are described in emergent themes. Six (6) emergent themes described the positive and negative experiences of the participants in the implementation of counterterrorism programs. For the positive experiences, three (3) emergent themes were developed, namely: *Personal Satisfaction and Job Fulfillment*, *Recognition from the Community*, and *Influence on Community Peace and Order*. For the negative experiences, three (3) emergent themes were also developed, namely: *Financial Constraints and Limited Resources*, *Familial Longings while on Mission*, and *Infiltration in Hotspot Areas*. Meanwhile, two (2) emergent themes were formulated to explain how the participants address the challenges encountered in the implementation of counterterrorism programs, namely *Coordination and Collaboration with Other Agencies* and *Community Engagement and Trust-Building Programs*. Finally, two (2) emergent themes were created to express the aspirations of the participants to improve the implementation of counterterrorism programs, namely *Continuous Training and Skills Development* and *Adequate Financial and Logistical Support*. Based on the emergent themes identified, it is recommended that the PNP-SAF commandos be exposed to continuous training and ongoing collaboration between agencies and partners to ensure an efficient response to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency incidents. By allocating an appropriate budget and implementing the requisite enhancement training and programs, the SAF commandos may be able to increase their effectiveness in implementing these initiatives.

| KEYWORDS

Special Action Forces, SAF Commandos, Philippine National Police, Phenomenology, Negros Island, Philippines.

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### 1. Introduction

The ever-changing demographics of society, the rise in terrorism and its complexity, as well as agitations, violent protests, a variety of political activities, left-wing terrorism, insurgency, and militancy, as well as the enforcement of economic and social laws, have all contributed to the difficulty of achieving the peaceful society that we all desire.

Internationally, the deployment of Special Action Forces has increased in response to changing security threats. For example, the number of Special Forces deployments in the United States has increased, with estimates predicting tens of thousands of missions per year. Counterterrorism activities and reactions to high-risk crises, such as hostage situations and armed standoffs, have a

substantial impact on these deployments. Internationally, other countries have established their own specialist forces, adding to global growth using Special Forces-style teams.

However, reporting and standards of SAF-related information differ significantly among nations, making presenting a complete worldwide assessment difficult. Discussions frequently revolve around the necessity for standardized reporting standards to examine the efficacy, impact, and possible issues linked with SAF operations worldwide.

At least 47 persons were killed by members of the New People's Army (NPA) on Negros Island from 2022 to 2023, a report released by the military showed. The fatalities include 34 civilians, five soldiers, three former rebels, four government officials, and one policeman. Data also showed that the killings from January to August this year reached 27, which was higher than the total for the entire 2022. Of the five NPA guerrilla fronts in Negros, three have been dismantled, and two have weakened.

The Special Action Force (SAF), also known as "Tagaligtas," is the Philippine National Police's (PNP) primary maneuver unit created as a highly specialized strike force to "win the hearts and minds of the people" during the 1980s. With the pressing need to ensure peace and order, internal security, and political stability of the country, the Special Action Force (SAF) from a battalion gradually expanded into a brigade rapid deployment force. Today, the PNP SAF has thirteen (13) line battalions, a force support battalion (FSB), and an Air Unit (AU) deployed in the different areas of the country, fulfilling the mandate of providing tactical support to other PNP units, AFP, and other Law Enforcement Agencies (PNPSAF.gov, 2016).

PNP SAF, as an elite unit, earned its reputation as one of the country's most respected and dependable rapid deployment forces through its renowned accomplishments that were etched in the history of the country over the last 37 years. These accomplishments include the unit's role in the success of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution and its prominence as a counter-coup force against the series of coup d'état attempts in the late 1980s.

PNP SAF is the counterterrorism and counter-insurgency unit of the Philippine National Police. It is an elite force whose members are trained in both law enforcement and military operations. In short, the Special Action Force is like the police and the military combined. Besides counterterrorism operations, the SAF also handles anti-insurgency and hostage rescue operations. The job includes search and rescue operations during disasters and civil disturbance management. SAF officers are also tapped to provide security to VIPs, including the President of the Philippines. Of all police units, only the Special Action Force trains its officers as commandos. The training at the unit's school in Fort Santo Domingo in Laguna province is as rigorous as the Philippine Army Scout Rangers course.

Nonetheless, it appears that the Special Action Force has been put to the test and is being thoroughly questioned by the public. It all started when the Mamasapano case (also known as OPLAN: Exodus) happened. It is a controversial special operations mission that was executed on January 25, 2015, by Philippine National Police commandos to neutralize high-value terrorist leaders. During the last phase of their operation, these commandos were swarmed by different armed groups in the area of operation, resulting in the deaths of forty-four (44) SAF Commandos.

Meanwhile, one research gap in the Philippines' SAF (Special Weapons and Tactics) activities is the little investigation of SAF personnel's life experiences and viewpoints and the communities they serve. These include studies on the following topics: the challenges and stressors of being a PNP-SAF officer, the physical and psychological effects of being a PNP-SAF officer, the coping mechanisms that PNP-SAF officers use to deal with the challenges of their job, and the aspirations of PNP SAF personnel to improve their functions.

As a criminologist, the researcher is interested to conduct the study because of the current situation happening in our country, particularly in Negros Island, where the number of insurgency cases is increasing. The Philippine National Police Special Action Force (PNP-SAF) specializes in counterterrorism and counter-insurgency, which is why the researcher is determined to explore the untold stories of the PNP-SAF. For this purpose, the research has been created.

## **2. Literature Review**

This research is primarily anchored on the Organizational Support Theory by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) and supported by the Competence Motivation Theory by Harter (1978), as well as the Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (1985).

According to Rhoades and Eisenberger's (2002) Organizational Support theory, employees consider how much their company values their contributions and cares about their well-being to satisfy their socio-emotional needs and assess the benefits of higher job effort. According to this theory, employees' perceptions of organizational support improve when they think they have received

preferential treatment from the firm regarding management support, fairness and procedural justice, incentives, and working conditions.

Employees who receive rewards outside of their contractual obligations view their employer as supportive. Employees' sense of duty to aid the company in achieving its goals, their emotional connection to the organization, and their anticipation that increased performance will be rewarded will all grow with perceived organization support (POS). Eisenberger et al. (1986) were the first to develop the idea of perceived organization support (POS) and explore how workers interpret the organization's commitment to them and how this perception affects their loyalty to the company.

The research found that employees' perceptions of organizational support positively impact their work outcomes, such as reduced absenteeism, turnover intentions, increased affective commitment, innovations and pro-social behaviors, performance, and compliance with organizational safety management policies (Armeli et al., 1998). Employees perceive the organization as providing them with essential incentives in addition to what is defined in their contracts, and they tend to tailor their behavior toward achieving organizational goals: that is, employees' perceptions of organizational support are reciprocated with high-quality service.

Social competence was positively connected to job performance among workers with poor perceived organization support (POS). Conversely, the link needed to be more present among workers who reported high levels of perceived organizational support. Low perceived organization support (POS) is likely to reflect features of settings outlined by trait activation theory supporters as boosting the effect of ability and skill attributes on performance. In contrast to high-perceived organization support situations, low-perceived organization support environments are more likely to need individuals to utilize social skills to enlist collaboration and acquire the resources required to achieve performance goals. Because low-perceived organizational support environments lack resources, high levels of social skill are required to meet coworkers' socioemotional needs and obtain cooperation, information, and other resources from the organization to ensure that desirable rewards are obtained (Hochwarter et al., 2006).

Harter's (1978) Competence Motivation Theory is a conceptual framework that explains an individual's drive to engage, persist, and work hard in any given accomplishment setting. The theory's primary tenet is that people are drawn to participate in certain activities. However, this hypothesis has also been applied to several work-related professions, most notably the police service. People enter a career for a variety of reasons. According to studies, incentives for the police profession include the potential to assist women and children (Moradian & Karimarie, 2012), aid others, work advantages, and security (Raganella & White, 2004). According to Aquino (2014), the attractiveness and authority portrayed by the police uniform and the service to their fellow citizens are the key motivators for police officers to stay on the job.

Individual evaluations of competence and affect in a particular accomplishment domain are central to Harter's (1978) approach to motivation. Harter argued that positive reinforcement from influential individuals for mastering attempts might improve perceptions of competence. Rather than recommending a specific quantity of reinforcement for solo mastery efforts, Harter (1978) advocated that more positive and less negative reactions from socializing agents would promote an innate motivational orientation. This perspective would result in heightened sensations of perceived competence and control, good effect, and motivated conduct. On the other hand, perception of failure and negative responses from important people should reduce perceived competence and control, raise anxiety, and reduce the probability of the individual participating in additional mastery attempts in that area.

The theory's central tenet is that people are drawn to participate in activities in which they feel competent or capable (Dweck & Elliot, 2005). Competence is the capacity to carry out or accomplish a job or tasks based on skills and knowledge and supported by the work-required attitude. Spencer & Spencer (2008) define competency as having three components: intellectual competence, emotional competence, and social competence. Competence motivation in creative problem-solving insight outlines issue-solving procedures in which answers frequently appear out of the blue and only after reorganizing the problem's conceptual framework. For more than a century, the phenomenon has been investigated and linked to significant activities like innovation and scientific discovery (Finke, 1996).

Success in optimally difficult tasks improves perceived competence, which improves intrinsic motivation, according to Harter's (1978) Competence Motivation theory. Individuals are motivated to seek out appropriately hard jobs to improve their judgments of competence (Rea, 2000; Reeve & Deci, 1996). According to Robbins and Judge (2012), motivation is a process that elucidates an individual's intensity, direction, and tenacity in achieving his goals. Although motivation is frequently associated with striving for a goal, the discussion is condensed and concentrates on organizational accomplishment objectives to represent our interest in work-related behavior. They asserted that the employee's job motivation significantly impacts their performance. Workers' productivity in any firm will rise when job motivation is further increased.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) is a metatheory of human motivation and personality that tackles autonomous actions and the conditions and processes that sustain such high-quality kinds of volitional involvement. Over the last decade, there has been a surge in fundamental, experimental, and applied research in sports and exercise contexts to put theoretical tenets to the test. This philosophy emphasizes personality growth and self-driven behavior modification. The idea that persons have an inbuilt organizational propensity toward development, self-integration, and psychological inconsistency is fundamental to the principle. Self-determination theory was initially a result of laboratory and field studies into how contextual cues like incentives, praise, and instructions affected intrinsic motivation (Markland et al., 2005).

Meyer and Gagne (2008) proposed that self-determination theory is better suited for evaluating the impact of motivation on work engagement. There are two types of self-determination: self-determined motivation and controlled motivation. Self-determined motivation refers to doing something for pleasure: volition or choice. Controlled motivation, conversely, is about internal pressure, such as a sense of responsibility, guilt, or punishment. As a result, self-determined motivation produces the most significant positive results, whereas controlled motivation provides the most damaging results.

Self-determination theory holds that people naturally desire to develop and integrate. One should be interested, actively investigate their surroundings, and engage in challenging and satisfying pursuits. However, not all human endeavors are intrinsically pleasing and fascinating. However, if an activity has been internalized, it might still have a sense of autonomy and choice, even if it is not intrinsically driven. Like other developmental theories on socialization, Self Determination Theory presupposes that internalization is a crucial component of personality development and adjustment in people (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hoffman, 1970).

According to the Self Determination Theory, internalization is the process by which young people gradually incorporate societal norms and values into a strong sense of who they are (Grolnick et al., 1997). The goal of the internalization process is for children to fully endorse the rules and values that their parents and society have established so that they come to regard them as their own (Grolnick et al., 1997; Joussemet et al., 2008). This is preferable to the more common outcome of children simply swallowing or taking in these rules and values. According to Self Determination Theory, actions that are intrinsically driven and internalized fully are both said to be autonomously governed, whereas activities that have only been partially or not at all internalized are said to be controlled by external reasons.

The Philippine government is serious about combating terrorism at both the national and international levels due to the threats it poses to national security, economic stability, and the safety of its citizens. Domestically, the Philippines has faced various forms of terrorism, particularly from groups such as the Abu Sayyaf, the New People's Army (NPA), and ISIS-linked groups like the Maute group, which have carried out violent attacks, kidnappings, and bombings. These acts not only endanger lives but also disrupt peace, affect economic development, and deter foreign investments. To maintain internal stability, protect infrastructure, and ensure public safety, the government has implemented laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which enhances its ability to prevent, combat, and prosecute terrorism-related offenses.

On the international front, the Philippines is committed to the global fight against terrorism as part of its responsibilities as a member of the United Nations and other international organizations. Terrorism is a transnational threat, with terror networks often operating across borders, necessitating international cooperation in intelligence sharing, law enforcement, and capacity-building. The Philippines has also aligned itself with counterterrorism frameworks established by organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and actively collaborates with other nations to combat global terrorism.

Republic Act No. 9372, or the Human Security Act of 2007, is a law that focuses on counterterrorism while safeguarding civil liberties. It defined terrorism as acts that created widespread fear and panic, such as murder, rebellion, and hijacking, with the goal of coercing the government. The law imposed heavy penalties for terrorist acts but placed strict safeguards on law enforcement, such as requiring judicial authorization for surveillance and mandating compensation of ₱500,000 per day for wrongful detention. Additionally, it emphasized protecting human rights, limiting government powers to avoid abuse, and maintaining constitutional safeguards against violations of civil liberties.

In contrast, Republic Act No. 11479 (2020), or the Anti-Terrorism Act, repealed Republic Act No. 9372 (2007), significantly broadened the scope of terrorism and gave the government more tools to combat terrorism. The new law expands the definition of terrorism to include acts intended to cause death, damage property, or disrupt critical infrastructure, even if no widespread panic is created. It also increases the powers of law enforcement, allowing for warrantless arrests and longer periods of detention (up to 24 days) without charge. Unlike Republic Act No. 9372, Republic Act No. 11479 removes the compensation for wrongful detention, which raise concerns among critics about potential abuse. While it aims to address evolving security threats, the new law has been criticized for potentially infringing on human rights and freedoms.

On the other hand, Republic Act No. 10168 (2012), also known as "The Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act," defines the crime of financing terrorism in the Philippines and establishes penalties for such offenses. The law emphasizes the state's responsibility to protect life, liberty, and property from terrorism and criminalizes the act of financing terrorism as a crime against the Filipino people and humanity. It mandates that the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC) and Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) play crucial roles in identifying, investigating, and freezing the assets of individuals or organizations involved in financing terrorism. The law also aligns with international commitments to combat terrorism financing, especially with respect to United Nations resolutions.

Under the Act, any individual or entity that provides financial support to terrorists or terrorist organizations or uses funds with the intent of furthering terrorist acts faces severe penalties, including imprisonment and fines. Additionally, the law punishes attempts, conspiracies, and involvement as an accomplice or accessory to the crime of terrorism financing. It grants the government the authority to freeze and forfeit assets related to terrorism while ensuring due process and allowing for limited humanitarian exceptions. Furthermore, the Act establishes procedures for the publication of designated persons or entities involved in terrorism and provides guidelines for covered institutions in complying with freeze orders (Republic Act No. 10168, 2012).

Before the creation of the PNP SAF, it is essential to discuss the legal basis of the creation of the Philippine National Police and its modernization and professionalization. The creation of Republic Act No. 6975 (1990) and Republic Act No. 8551 (1998) in the Philippines marked significant milestones in the restructuring and modernization of the country's law enforcement agencies. RA 6975, enacted in December 1990, established the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) and the Philippine National Police (PNP), unifying the functions of several agencies under a single umbrella. This consolidation aimed to streamline coordination, enhance efficiency, and improve the overall effectiveness of law enforcement efforts nationwide. Subsequently, RA 8551, passed in 1998, focused on strengthening the PNP by professionalizing its ranks, improving its capabilities, and establishing a framework for career development. The legislation provided guidelines for recruitment, training, and promotion within the PNP, emphasizing meritocracy and adherence to high ethical standards. Republic Act No. 6975 (1990) and Republic Act No. 8551 (1998) laid the foundation for a more cohesive and professional law enforcement system in the Philippines, contributing to the country's broader efforts in maintaining peace and order.

The 80s had been a hard transition for the country. It was a volatile phase that was a result of the uprisings against the Marcos regime, including the anarchy propagated by insidious parties in its quest to overthrow the government. Among the dominant group of insurgents are the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led by the ideologue, former UP Professor Nur Misuari, the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CCP-NPA), and the other organized and well-entrenched criminals operating nationwide. The atrocities reached such alarming levels, prompting the former Philippine Constabulary to create a particular unit to address existing precarious situations.

On May 12, 1983, under General Order 323 of the Headquarters of the Philippine Constabulary, the PC Special Action Force (PCSAF) was created. It was the brainchild of then AFP Vice Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Fidel Ramos, with the assistance of his Chief of Operations, Col. Renato De Villa. Before the formal activation, sixty-five (65) officers and enlisted personnel composed the initial command core. In its humble beginnings, PCSAF was entrusted to then PC Major Reynaldo V. Velasco (1st SAF Commander, 1983-1987). Initially, SAF absorbed 149 PC personnel. Of that total number, twenty-six (26) were commissioned officers. The rest of the enlisted personnel came from various units, including the defunct PC Brigade, the Long-Range Patrol Battalion (LRP), the K-9 Support Company, the PC Special Organized Group, the Light Reaction Unit (LRU) of PC METROCOM, the Constabulary Off-shore Action Command (COSAC) and other PC Units. PCSAF's existence was to systematically indoctrinate, acclimatize, and familiarize its personnel with the emerging realities of armed struggles- the gradual employment of unconventional warfare and other specialized operations that made it a distinct unit of the PC (PNPSAF.gov, 2016).

Over the years, Ramos was a 46-year-old Army Brigadier General on the eve of his takeover as Chief of the Philippine Constabulary (PC) in a concurrent capacity as Director-General of the Integrated National Police (INP)—a position which he held for fourteen years. Later on, during his guard as AFP Vice-Chief of Staff in concurrent capacity as Chief, PC/DG, INP, as always, he unleashed his potential as a well-seasoned warrior gained through the years of field experiences obtained in Korea, Vietnam, and greater degree, as a Commanding Officer of the Army's Special Forces against a calculating home front enemies that try to subvert the nation's politico-socio-eco stability, namely: the CPP/NDF and its military arm – the dreaded New People Army; the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by a former ideologue UP professor, Nur Misuari, and the rising tide of criminality and lawlessness (PNPSAF.gov, 2016).

Added to this grim everyday struggle that confronted the nation and was unaware to many was a more pressing problem within the AFP/INP establishment that should have been addressed immediately and in a drastic manner by the Marcos Administration, but in doing so, it was taken lightly and complacently and in the end, paid a price worth more than the entire Marcos Administration

itself turned EDSA Revolution - the historic internal bickering between General Fidel Ramos and General Fabian Ver. This controversy brought fruition to the Philippine Constabulary Special Action Force, whose counterpart is the AFP Special Forces.

There were specific circumstances that gave birth to the then PC SAF. "An eye for an eye, a tooth by a tooth," done in a classical cloak-and-dagger story, was a tall order during those pre-Edsa Revolution days as the Ramos-Ver controversy increasingly gripped the guardians of the nation's security. The latter, in a "coup de grace" or final death blow, crippled General Ramos' hold of the Philippine Constabulary by deactivating all the PC Brigades, the lone PC units then with readily available combat capabilities, and converting them into territorial forces under the administrative and operational control of Ver's organizational strategic masterpiece - the Regional Unified Commands (RUCs) whose personnel and equipment came from the different AFP branches gave rise to a composite unit.

Under these trying circumstances, Ramos was virtually sitting in a half-emptied kingdom with a reduced effective combat maneuver force. This gave Ver the edge to control the military and police establishment within his whims and caprices. This emboldened Ramos, with the assistance of Colonel Renato De Villa's supervision and leadership management skills, then the PC/INP Chief of Operations, providently contemplated to protect the PC/INP from further combat force reduction through an off-set method by spearheading the activation of a battalion-sized elite combat unit named as the "Philippine Constabulary Special Action Force" or acronym "PC SAF" on May 16, 1983, pursuant to HPC GO Nr 323, possessed with the following characteristics, namely: manned by qualified in-service PC personnel who are highly trained in unconventional warfare and can operate in any terrain both urban and rural, in all weather, in any war dimensions (air, land and sea); highly mobile and equipped with the best logistical materiel (firearms, communications, transportation and technology or the ability to "move, fire and communicate with precision") available in the market (PNP SAF.gov, 2016).

When Marcos fell ill, Ramos and De Villa covertly and meticulously planned a contingency known as "Exercise Ligtas Isla," designed as a countermeasure in case General Ver and Imelda Marcos attempted to take the reins of power if Ferdinand Marcos died. PNP SAF was founded by the then Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Vice Chief of Staff and Philippine Constabulary (PC) Chief, Lieutenant General Fidel Valdez Ramos, on May 16, 1983. PNP SAF's primary task was to battle insurgency and terrorism. Eventually, the unit expanded its role to battle organized crime groups and high-value target criminals. Today, its functions include counterinsurgency operations, counterterrorism in urban and rural areas, hostage rescue, civil disturbance management, search and rescue operations during disasters and calamities, and other special operations (PNP SAF.gov, 2016).

The development of a training program to equip its personnel with the knowledge and skills superior to that of the enemy forces was then realized, paving the way for the realization of the SAF Ranger Course, later renamed the SAF Commando Course. The PNP Special Action Force is a highly specialized police unit designed to fight against organized crime groups, terrorists, insurgents, lawless elements, and Southern Philippine Terrorists. As a rapid deployment force, SAF destroys enemy forces that undermine the nation's stability with overwhelming combat power and engages the latter at any time and anywhere in the country, even in the most rugged terrain. We define our SAF vision as a condition, perceived first by the mind and felt by the heart, of what every SAF trooper desires the PNP SAF organization to be at a certain time in the future and to which every one of them is prepared to contribute to its realization.

The Philippine National Police Special Action Force Seal, with the motto "Tagaligtas," translated in English as "Savior," symbolizes the command's commitment to serve and protect its clientele - the public. The very imposing wings and the pristine blue sea superimposed with a sniper scope's crosshair symbolize the commands' ability to operate in any traditional dimensions or war by land, sea, and air. The vertical bolo reminds us of our forebears' pre-Spanish weapons that effectively thwart foreign invaders. With the silent swiftness of a striking bolo, SAF will defend the country from foreign domination at all costs and swear to inflict casualties on the enemy. The dominant red color reminds us of SAF's glorious traditions of sacrifice for God, Country, and People. On the other hand, the less dominant color of yellow symbolizes bravery and courage despite all odds in the face of danger.

The PNP SAF's mission involves planning and conducting special operations as a rapid deployment force anywhere in the country, especially in the areas of counterterrorism, hostage rescue, crowd control, search and rescue, and disturbance management in times of national disasters or emergencies.

Meanwhile, the following are functions of PNP SAF, to wit: to develop, organize, and train organic personnel in the furtherance of the assigned mission, to conduct a counter-terrorist operation in urban and rural areas, to conduct commando-type unconventional warfare (CUW) against lawless elements over extended period of time with minimal direction and control, to conduct search and rescue operations anywhere in the country during calamities and catastrophes, to conduct civil disturbance management (CDM) operation and address the requirements of stability and security operations in times of civil disobedience on a national scale, to operate as a rapid deployment force ready and capable to strike anytime and anywhere in the country in

support of other units and other agencies as higher headquarters may direct, to perform other tasks as the Chief, PNP may direct, and to maintain a reasonable degree of law and order in the national highways and major thoroughfares (PNP SAF.gov, 2016).

Through the years, the Special Action Force (SAF) pushed the mark to become the elite unit of the PNP. A unit that is imbued with rich traditions and characterized by gallant men and noble officers who brought it to higher and loftier planes. The SAF Logo aptly represents its undying commitment to serve and protect the country. The 'Tabak' or jungle knife, the magnificent wing, the pristine blue sea, and the sniper scope crosshair symbolize the unit's capability to operate by land, water, and air, whilst the dominant red color represents SAF's glorious traditions of sacrifice for God, Country, and People.

In a book published by Banlaoi (2009), he comprehensively discussed the counterterrorism measures in Southeast Asia and their effectiveness. When the United States declared the global war against terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, Southeast Asia was named the "second front," next to Afghanistan. The presence of Al-Qaeda linked and inspired terrorist groups in the region, notably the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), considered Southeast Asia as one of the world's epicenters of terrorism studies and counter terrorism operations. Since 9/11, the region has seen the implementation of various counter terrorism measures at the national, bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels. These measures resulted in the arrest, neutralization, and even killings of key terrorist personalities in Southeast Asia. Some were convinced to disengage from the use of political violence and leave terrorism behind. Yet, terrorist threats continue to loom large in the security agenda of Southeast Asian states as surviving elements of JI and AS are still planning to and wreaking terrorist havocs. While many leaders have been killed in battle, executed, imprisoned, or convinced to leave terrorism behind, there are still younger members willing to take the place of their predecessors. This is attributed to the fact that the ideology of Al-Qaedaism that informs the actions of terrorist groups in Southeast Asia remains alive. Moreover, terrorism in Southeast Asia has long standing underlying ideological origins that require comprehensive and more nuanced counter terrorism measures.

There are many ways to define terrorism, but a useful and practical definition is provided by the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), which is a comprehensive annual report analyzing the impact of terrorism around the world (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020). The 2020 GTI examined 163 countries, covering 99.7% of the world's population, in terms of terrorism's effect on lives lost, injuries, and property damage. Data showed Afghanistan and Iraq were ranked at the top shortly after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, while Syria rose in rank from 100th position to within the top 10 during the Arab Spring. However, it is important to note that the Philippines is the only South-East Asian country to consistently hover within the GTI top 10 in the 20 years since the start of the Index. From 2002 to 2019, the Philippines ranked 13th to 8th in the GTI and averaging at the 10th position. This is not surprising, particularly given the recent impact of global terrorism through the 2017 ISIS-supported terrorist siege of Marawi in the southern Philippines. However, the Philippines has been featured around the GTI's top 10 even prior to the rise of ISIS (Brey, 2023).

The Philippines has been plagued by terrorism for decades and has one of the longest-running insurgencies in the world (Joshi, 2017). The Philippines has a range of religious and ideologically motivated terrorist groups. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its offshoot organization, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), are both Islamist inspired. They sought an independent state in the south of Mindanao, where a majority of Muslims reside.

From 1996 to 2018, both groups have been party to peace negotiations and agreements with the Philippine Government that have led to renouncing the use of violence. In 2008, members of the MILF who did not want to be part of the peace process established the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is another Islamist terrorist group that operates in the south-west Philippines. It pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2014 and is now officially known as Islamic State–East Asia Province, also referred to as the ASG-IS. While Islamist extremist groups have traditionally focused on the southern Philippines, particularly in Mindanao, the Philippines also faces a longstanding communist insurgency that has seen attacks across the country (Brey, 2023). The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), led by Nur Misuari, began fighting a separatist rebellion in 1969 and is one of the world's pioneering modern Muslim separatist movements. The group has strong links with international terror groups that can be traced back to the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the armed opposition to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These links ensured valuable training experience for the MNLF, as well as providing technical, financial, and ideological support. During the 1980s, the MNLF sent around 500 members to Afghanistan to undergo military training and join the Mujahideen (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, foreign fighters, including Filipinos from the MNLF, returned home. Meanwhile, the remaining Mujahideen in Afghanistan had disagreements and infighting, with the Taliban eventually emerging as the dominant group.

Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani was one of the Mujahideen the MNLF sent to Afghanistan. He returned to the Philippines along with other foreign fighters. Meanwhile, negotiations between the MNLF and the Philippine Government had been underway to establish an Autonomous Region in the Philippines'. Disagreement among Janjalani and other leading MNLF members over these negotiations led to the establishment of the ASG in 1991, led by Janjalani (Amadar & Tuttle, 2018). The ASG remains active to date,

along with the MNLF and its other splinter group, the MILF, established in 1984 and led by Hashim Salamat (de Lima, 2021), although the MNLF and MILF have both committed to an ongoing peace process. However, the recent rise of global Islamist extremism has continued to affect the Philippines.

Gamil (2016) comprehensively discussed what it takes to become a PNP SAF. Besides counterterrorism operations, the SAF also handles anti-insurgency and hostage rescue operations. The job also includes search and rescue operations during disasters and civil disturbance management. SAF officers are also tapped to provide security to VIPs, including the President of the Philippines. Like all rookie police applicants, aspiring SAF officers must first meet the general and documentary requirements for Police Officer 1 (PO1) and then undergo the six-month basic public safety course at the National Police Training Institute in Laguna. From there, they move on to field training, which takes another six months (Gamil, 2016). The field training program is like the on-the-job training program for all rookie police, where they are distributed to police stations to get a feel of the daily police grind, ranging from investigation and intelligence work to traffic and patrolling. Then comes the training unique to the SAF, the commando course, which takes another six months, although, in practice, it could take up to two years.

For the duration of the commando course, the trainees live in tarpaulin tents pitched on humid, dusty fields in Fort Santo Domingo. This "tent city" serves as their barracks as they undergo daily physical exercises interspersed with classroom instructions. A regular sight at the camp would be students on "load runs," in which they jog around a 1.2-kilometer oval carrying rucksacks filled with 18 kilos of sand on their backs. Students are subjected to this exercise at least thrice a day, training for future missions in which they must lug around weapons, ammunition, rations, and medical equipment (Gamil, 2016).

Gamil (2016) also tackled the training at the camp, which has five phases, with subjects ranging from first aid, jungle, mountaineering, and navigation techniques to communications, weapons efficiency, combat skills, air-to-ground support, and marksmanship. SAF training includes mission planning, which involves the students drafting operation plans using real intelligence. Eventually, the students will be sent out of the camp for field training. But the final phase, the test mission, sees the students deployed on real operations for at least a month. If they are embroiled in an encounter with enemy forces during the test mission, they will automatically be recommended for graduation. Only the tough will survive boot camp. Most dropouts are due to medical reasons. After graduation, the troopers receive their reward: the black beret with the SAF's winged sword logo. The road to becoming "elite" police officers doesn't end there. The SAF has its version of master's studies.

After commando school, the troopers have the option to take further "specialized" courses. "Sure shock" or the urban counterrevolutionary warfare course requires counterterrorism units and crucial training for hostage situations; explosives and ordnance disposal; K9; airborne for air operations; and the maritime tactical operation course (MTOC). The Maritime Tactical Operation Course (MTOC) is exclusive schooling for the "elite of the elite" SAF troopers, the Seaborne. To qualify for the MTOC, troopers should be "Sure shock-qualified and airborne-qualified". The commandos are then distributed to nine battalions across the country, including the rapid deployment, force support, and air units. Each battalion has its eligibility test (Gamil, 2016).

"Seaborne" is the monicker for the 84th Special Action Company (SAC), the strike force for "Oplan Exodus" deployed to get Marwan. Of the 44 SAF commandos killed in the Mamasapano operation, nine were from Seaborne. Surprisingly, after Mamasapano, the SAF saw an increase in applicants, mostly from Mindanao. In July and October 2015, around 500 SAF applicants took their oaths as PO1s. "Most of them were from Mindanao.

Meanwhile, in this article, Sanchez (2015) discussed the PNP SAF's way of life. For those who decide to join the elite police Special Action Force (SAF), the sacrifices start with basic training and do not stop until they are killed or transferred to another unit. An Air-to-Ground Operation Seminar has a SAF police officer jumping from a helicopter about 10 feet off the ground, carrying a 30-kilo backpack and a rifle, then running to engage the enemy as soon as they hit the ground. Those learning close-quarters battle techniques are grouped into eight-man teams as they go from room to room.

According to Sanchez (2015), what is not included in the official training courses are tactics to render them inured to torture: making police officers squat and eat meals in a bathroom overflowing with feces, hanging on to a tree branch, enduring being bitten by red ants while clad only in their underwear; being grabbed at night hogtied and dropped into the sea; and spending the night outdoors, sitting in a drum of water. Even while drinking, the SAF trains its members to remain in control. Someone who becomes "ma-uy," a quarrelsome, noisy drunk, gets punished, Ricky. Among the more common forms of punishment are the "tusok-ulo," which has a SAF member assume a pose similar to yoga's downward dog, except that the head, not the hands, touch the floor, and the "kaldag," a quick, hard jab to the solar plexus.

Sanchez (2015) further disclosed that SAF police officers receive their mission orders through verbal commands or text messages, with code words used. These code words are unique to each team or battalion. Directions on paper leave these orders vulnerable



to being intercepted by criminals or terrorists. Once they receive their mission orders, each police officer calls or sends text messages to their loved ones, saying, "May lakad kami (We are going for a walk)." SAF members simply tell their loved ones they will contact them when they return. No goodbyes, lest they be permanent. Missions can sometimes last as long as three weeks, with no contact between SAF members and their families. SAF members who are about to get or just got married or celebrate their birthday are excluded from missions based on a superstition that they are more likely to get killed.

Part of their preparation is wearing shoe polish for night missions so the enemy will not see their faces. Before putting on socks and combat boots, they put panty liners on the soles of their feet to absorb moisture and prevent fungal infection. Some cases are so bad that weeping sores between the toes and toenails fall off. Panty liners and individually wrapped sanitary napkins are also suitable for absorbing blood and protecting wounds. He said that bright and shiny items, like a rifle barrel and jewelry, can get you killed when they reflect sunlight. SAF troopers take pains to dull the shine of metal weapons and avoid wearing even wedding rings during missions. Smoking can kill a SAF trooper – the scent of cigarette smoke alerts those in the area to your presence, and the light at the tip of a cigarette means there is a fool at the other end (Sanchez, 2015).

Those on a mission bring enough food, rations, pots, and pans to last the mission's duration. SAF troopers do not accept food or drink from residents of an area when they are on a mission and do not pick fruit or leaves to leave less of a path for enemies to follow. Once a SAF trooper goes on a mission, they cannot use bath and laundry soaps. "Soap bubbles or scent travel through water and may give away your location," he said, adding that they cannot enjoy an ordinary bath until a mission ends.

Sanchez (2015) further disclosed that SAF officers back at police camps play "endless" chess games, jogging to keep fit, doing target practice, and sparring to spend the days between missions. The long periods of separation take a toll on marriages: one SAF member's wife had a nervous breakdown and remains unable to function. In contrast, others have had wives call or send them messages to tell them they found another man. Others come back from visits home only to tell that they have been cuckolded, that other men have taken their place, even as they continue to send money home. SAF members treasure laptop computers and "time-share" them with colleagues so they can view photos of loved ones on social media websites.

Finally, Sanchez (2015) expressed that while he understands that each police camp has been allotted funds to buy food for its personnel, other police officers assigned to provincial camps have had to contribute P500 each payday to get barely enough food. In Jolo and Tawi-Tawi, they get a cup of rice, two pieces of sardines, a matchbox-sized chicken, or a cup of vegetable stew at each meal. "Eggs, pork, and beef are dreams best left to those assigned to police camps in urban areas. For the simple chore of buying food, toiletries, and other supplies outside the police camp, SAF police officers go in teams and are armed, alert for ambushes.

In summary, the SAF operatives and the whole PNP-SAF unit are one of the frontliners in implementing the government's counterterrorism measures. Most informants desired continuous training and ongoing collaboration between agencies and partners to ensure an efficient response to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency incidents. So, the government is requested to allocate an appropriate budget and implement the requisite enhancement training and programs so the SAF commandos may be able to increase their effectiveness in implementing these official functions.

### **3. Methodology**

This section presents the research design, research environment, research participants, research instrument, research procedures, collection of data, analysis of data, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness of the study.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The researcher used a qualitative approach to investigate the participants' life experiences. Qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry that aims to comprehend certain events in their natural context.

The researcher used transcendental phenomenology, founded on principles outlined by Husserl (1931), and transformed into a qualitative approach by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas' (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology focused on describing participants' experiences rather than the researcher's judgments. Transcendental phenomenology is a philosophical method aimed at investigating the structures of consciousness and the essence of experiences. Unlike empirical studies that explore the external world, transcendental phenomenology focuses on how objects and phenomena are experienced from a first-person perspective, seeking to understand the foundational elements of perception, meaning, and intentionality. Central to this approach is the epoche, or phenomenological reduction, where one "brackets" assumptions about the existence of the external world to focus purely on the contents of consciousness.

In addition, Husserl's concept of bracketing was emphasized. The investigator had to set aside his experience as much as possible and take a fresh perspective on the phenomenon under examination based on the description of the lived experience presented

by the participant in the research project. Transcendental means perceiving everything freshly, as if for the first time. This state is seldom perfectly achieved, but the researcher had to be aware of the need for bracketing and concentrate on the participant's description as much as possible.

Moustakas (1994) included in the research process identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from several persons who had experienced the phenomenon. The researcher then analyzed the data to identify significant statements or quotes and combined the statements into themes. Then, the researcher provided a list of various experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context), and a description that explained the overall essence of the experience.

The researcher greatly understood that the most appropriate approach for this study was phenomenological research, which explored the whys and wherefores of Philippine National Police Special Action Force (PNP SAF) operatives by digging into their lived experiences.

### **3.2 Research Environment**

This research study was conducted on Negros Island, specifically in the Provinces of Negros Oriental and Negros Occidental.

Negros Oriental is located in the western portion of the Visayan group of islands in the country. The province had a total land area of 540,230 hectares or 5,402.3 square kilometers with a population of 1,354,995 as of May 1, 2018 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018). Negros Oriental is a laid-back province situated in the southeastern portion of Negros Island, Visayas, Philippines. Dumaguete City is the capital of Negros Oriental. The government was also located in the capital area of the city. The province of Negros Oriental is further subdivided into a total of 19 municipalities, 6 cities, and 557 barangays.

On the other hand, Negros Occidental occupies the northern and western parts of Negros Island, the fourth largest island in the Philippines. The province is bounded by the Visayan Sea on the north, Tanon Strait and Negros Oriental on the east, Guimaras Strait on the northwest, Panay Gulf on the southwest, and Sulu Sea on the south. Its capital is Bacolod City, a land area of 726.06 km<sup>2</sup> a population of more than 2,396,039. The northern and western parts are largely level plains and gently rolling slopes. The remaining portion consists of mountain ranges of varied elevations. Mt. Canlaon is the highest peak in the Visayas. Other major mountains are Mt. Madalagan and Mt. Silay (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018).

The 65SAC/6SAB SAF unit is located in Sagay city, Negros Oriental, with a total of seventy (70) personnel. Sagay is a coastal component city in the province of Negros Occidental. The city has a land area of 330.34 square kilometers or 127.54 square miles which constitutes 4.21% of Negros Occidental's total area. Its population, as determined by the 2020 Census, was 148,894. This represented 5.68% of the total population of Negros Occidental province or 1.87% of the overall population of the Western Visayas region. Based on these figures, the population density is computed at 451 inhabitants per square kilometer or 1,167 inhabitants per square mile. The annual regular revenue of Sagay for the fiscal year of 2016 was ₱637,717,302.27. The household population of Sagay in the 2015 Census was 146,005, broken down into 33,488 households or an average of 4.36 members per household (PhilAtlas.com, 2023).

The second unit is the 61SAC in the municipality of Isabela with sixty (60) personnel. Isabela is a landlocked municipality in the coastal province of Negros Occidental. The municipality has a land area of 178.76 square kilometers or 69.02 square miles which constitutes 2.28% of Negros Occidental's total area. Its population, as determined by the 2020 Census, was 64,516. This represented 2.46% of the total population of Negros Occidental province or 0.81% of the overall population of the Western Visayas region. Based on these figures, the population density is computed at 361 inhabitants per square kilometer or 935 inhabitants per square mile. The annual regular revenue of Isabela for the fiscal year of 2016 was ₱135,452,509.52. The household population of Isabela in the 2015 Census was 62,043, broken down into 13,801 households or an average of 4.50 members per household (PhilAtlas.com, 2023).

The third unit is the 64SAC, located in Guihulngan City, with a total of sixty four (64) personnel. Guihulngan is a coastal component city in the province of Negros Oriental. The city has a land area of 388.56 square kilometers or 150.02 square miles which constitutes 7.17% of Negros Oriental's total area. Its population, as determined by the 2020 Census, was 102,656. This represented 7.16% of the total population of Negros Oriental province or 1.27% of the overall population of the Central Visayas region. Based on these figures, the population density is computed at 264 inhabitants per square kilometer or 684 inhabitants per square mile. The annual regular revenue of Guihulngan for the fiscal year of 2016 was ₱556,025,049.36. The household population of Guihulngan in the 2015 Census was 95,697, broken down into 22,518 households or an average of 4.25 members per household (PhilAtlas.com, 2023).

The fourth unit is the 63SAC, located in Dumaguete City, with a total of sixty seven (67) personnel. Dumaguete is a coastal component city in the province of Negros Oriental. It serves as the provincial capital. The city has a land area of 33.62 square kilometers or 12.98 square miles which constitutes 0.62% of Negros Oriental's total area. Its population, as determined by the 2020 Census, was 134,103. This represented 9.36% of the total population of Negros Oriental province or 1.66% of the overall population of the Central Visayas region. Based on these figures, the population density is computed at 3,989 inhabitants per square kilometer or 10,332 inhabitants per square mile. The annual regular revenue of Dumaguete for the fiscal year of 2016 was ₱634,949,796.09. The household population of Dumaguete in the 2015 Census was 129,226, broken down into 29,750 households or an average of 4.34 members per household (PhilAtlas.com, 2023).

### **3.3 Research Participants**

The participants of this study were the Philippine National Police Special Action Force (PNP SAF) officers assigned throughout the provinces of Negros Oriental and Negros Occidental, who expressed their willingness, commitment, and interest in partaking in this study. Thus, the researcher carefully and circumspectly chose ten (10) participants who could disclose their lived experiences, including how the participants addressed the challenges encountered in the implementation of the counterterrorism programs and the aspirations of the participants to improve the implementation of these programs.

There were a total of ten (10) participants in this study. Two (2) SAF Commandos were assigned to 63SAC Company, Brgy. Taclobo, Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental, and two (2) SAF Commandos assigned at 64SAC Company, Brgy. Mackinley, Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental were subjected to individual in-depth interviews. Meanwhile, three (3) SAF Commandos were assigned to the 6SAB Battalion, Brgy. Poblacion, Sagay City, Negros Occidental, and three (3) SAF Commandos assigned at 61SAC Company, Brgy. Guintubhan, Isabela, Negros Occidental were subjected to a focus group discussion.

The study's participants were qualified and identified based on their years of experience as SAF Commandos, which was at least 3 years in service and above, to generate lots of information based on their years of practice. Also, the participants had to have experience in encounters with terrorists operating in their area of jurisdiction. The participants should have undergone specialized training in advanced weapons handling, close-quarter battle, hostage negotiation, urban warfare tactics, hand-to-hand combat, and counterterrorism.

### **3.4 Research Instrument**

For this study, the researcher designed an interview guide to identify the lived experiences of the participants. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of biographical questions to help the researcher better understand the participant and to set a friendly atmosphere between the researcher and the participant. The next segment of the questionnaire included preliminary questions about the participants' experiences in the implementation of the counterterrorism programs. The third part of the questionnaire focused on how the participants addressed the challenges concerning the implementation of the counterterrorism programs. The final part covered the aspirations of the participants to improve the implementation of the counterterrorism programs. The interview guide was validated by a panel of experts to ensure that the contents reflected the statement of the problem and subproblems.

### **3.5 Research Procedures**

The researcher submitted transmittal letters to the three (3) PNP SAF Commanders and one (1) Battalion Commander of Negros Island, awaiting their approval. The letter provided a concise overview of the researcher's background, the study's title, objectives, and pertinent details regarding the participants, research methodology, and significance. Permission was sought to conduct focus group discussions and individual interviews with ten (10) PNP SAF Commandos, ensuring the confidentiality of all gathered data. Additionally, the communication included the interview guide and informed consent form. Upon receiving approval from the SAF Station Commanders, the researcher submitted the research protocol to the university ethics review board for ethical review. The protocol approval certificate was issued subsequently.

Upon receipt of protocol approval certificate from the ethics committee, the researcher coordinated the scheduling of focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. Upon finalization of the schedule, a courtesy call was made to the PNP SAF Battalion Commander and Company Commanders in Negros Island. Subsequently, the researcher met with the participants at a location where they felt secure and at ease. During this meeting, the researcher provided a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, interview procedures, confidentiality measures, and the identity and rights of the participants. If the participants agreed to participate, each was asked to sign the informed consent form, serving as documented consent for their participation in the interviews.

### **3.5.1 Data Collection**

The data collection methods utilized in this study were a combination of individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Prior to the interviews, the researcher ensured that potential participants met the selection criteria and informed them of the voluntary nature of their involvement, emphasizing their right to interrupt or terminate the interview at any point. It was clarified to the participants that no rewards would be provided for their participation, as stated in the informed consent form. The researcher introduced the interview guide, validated and approved by a panel of experts, to the participants before commencing the interviews. Participants were informed of the use of an audio recorder during the interviews.

Subsequently, a focus group discussion was conducted with six (6) participants, followed by individual in-depth interviews with four (4) participants, resulting in a comprehensive dataset. The researcher guaranteed meticulous record-keeping of all discussions and activities during both individual and group sessions. Verbatim transcription of the recordings was undertaken, with subsequent translation of transcripts into English prior to data analysis.

### **3.5.2 Data Analysis**

In this study, the researcher employed Colaizzi's (1978) method to analyze the gathered data. Initially, each transcript underwent thorough reading and re-reading to ensure a deep understanding of its contents. Next, relevant statements related to the phenomenon under investigation were extracted from each transcript and documented along with their corresponding page and line references. Following this, the meanings conveyed by these significant statements were formulated, and each meaning was organized into categories to provide a comprehensive portrayal. These formulated meanings were then grouped into categories, clusters of themes, and emergent themes.

The study's conclusions integrated the findings to offer a comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon was outlined, and the findings were streamlined to eliminate redundant, misunderstood, or excessively detailed descriptions. Finally, the validity of the findings was confirmed through feedback from the research participants, ensuring that the descriptive outcomes resonated with their real-life experiences.

## **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Engaging in qualitative research about PNP SAF Officers imposes inherent ethical responsibilities to minimize harm and enhance benefits. In this study, which delves into the work-life of PNP SAF Officers, the commitment to ethical conduct is of utmost importance. This section delineates how the research adhered to the fundamental principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy.

### **3.6.1 Beneficence.**

The primary objective of the study was to contribute positively to the well-being of PNP SAF Officers, advocating for enhanced working conditions and support systems. The research sought to bring attention to the distinctive challenges and needs of these individuals by providing a platform for their voices, with the potential to influence favorable policy and systemic changes. Furthermore, participants were offered post-interview resources and support services.

### **3.6.2 Non-Maleficence.**

A central concern was the minimization of potential harm. Participation was entirely voluntary, involving a comprehensive informed consent process that elucidated the study's purpose, potential risks, and participants' rights, including the ability to withdraw at any point without consequences. Anonymized data collection and storage procedures were implemented to ensure confidentiality. Sensitive topics were approached with empathy and respect, and participants received debriefing and emotional support as needed.

### **3.6.3 Justice.**

Ensuring a fair and equitable research process was pivotal. Recruitment efforts targeted a diverse sample that accurately represented the demographics of PNP SAF officers within the assigned jurisdiction. Selection was based on informed consent and willingness to participate, avoiding predetermined criteria that could introduce bias. Data analysis remained attuned to potential power imbalances, striving to authentically represent participants' experiences.

### **3.6.4 Autonomy.**

Respecting participants' autonomy was interwoven throughout the research process. Informed consent forms utilized clear and accessible language, emphasizing participants' right to make informed decisions about their involvement. Strict avoidance of coercion or undue influence was upheld. Participants were empowered to control the pace and content of the interviews, and their feedback on the research findings was actively sought to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness of Research**

Trustworthiness consists of four different components: credibility (the validity of the findings), transferability (the applicability of the findings in other contexts), dependability (reliability of the findings at another time), and confirmability (the objectivity of the researcher while carrying out his/her research). The combination of these four terms constitutes the trustworthiness criteria, thus forming conventional pillars for qualitative methodology (Guba, 1981).

#### **3.7.1 Credibility**

It is the first aspect or criterion that must be established. It is seen as the most important aspect or measure in establishing trustworthiness because credibility essentially asks the researcher to link the research study's findings with reality to demonstrate the truth of the research findings.

#### **3.7.2 Transferability**

The researcher will also establish transferability by providing a robust and detailed account of his experiences during data collection. The researcher will make explicit connections to the cultural and social contexts that surround data collection. This means talking about where the interviews transpired, the general setup of the environment, and other aspects of data collection that help provide a richer and fuller understanding of the research setting. Thus, constitutes the idea that the research study's findings could apply to other contexts, situations, times, and populations (Guba, 1981).

#### **3.7.3 Dependability**

Dependability, on the other hand, is also important to trustworthiness because it establishes the research study's findings as consistent and repeatable. The researcher will aim to verify that the findings are consistent with the raw data they collected, making sure that if some other researchers were to look over the data, they would arrive at similar findings, interpretations, and conclusions about the data. This is important to make sure that anything will not be missed in the research study, or that the researcher will not be sloppy or misguided in his or her final report (Guba, 1981).

#### **3.7.4 Confirmability**

Guba (1981) posited that confirmability is the last criterion of trustworthiness the researcher needs to establish in this study. This criterion has to do with the level of confidence that the research study's findings will be based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases.

### **3.8 Bracketing and Reflexivity**

Conducting qualitative research as a novice, my limited experience in this domain raises the possibility that the quality of analysis may be affected by my background. The study, focusing on SAF officers, demands a keen recognition of potential personal biases. This introduces a layer of complexity that necessitates a vigilant reflexivity throughout the research process. Understanding and addressing the potential impact of this relationship on data collection, analysis, and interpretation is essential to ensure the research maintains integrity and rigor.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **4.1 Experiences of the Informants in the Implementation of Counterterrorism Programs**

#### **4.1.1 Positive Experiences**

##### **4.1.1.1 Personal Satisfaction and Job Fulfillment.**

The participants conveyed personal satisfaction in making a meaningful impact in serving and protecting the public effectively. This indicated their profound commitment to the nation's service, emphasizing the satisfaction and fulfillment that result from safeguarding the lives of their fellow citizens and their families as a member of the PNP-SAF.

*(Sir, of course, we are all happy to hear such positive feedback about the help we have provided to the community and the public. For our SAF members fighting against insurgency, their efforts are not only to protect our country but also our families. We cannot tolerate or allow insurgent actions to go unchecked; we must address them to remain effective in our service. That's why we follow the SAF mission and the mandate given to us. Regarding terrorism, we conduct counter-terrorist operations to maintain balance and ensure safety). (Participant 1)*

*(Sir, being here makes me truly happy because, as a civilian, there were things I couldn't do. Now, I feel empowered and authorized to help those in need and accomplish what needs to be done). (Participant 3)*

*(For me, personally, I am committed to continuing to serve the country. The greatest joy for us in the SAF is the satisfaction of helping and protecting our fellow countrymen and our families. This dedication is why we remain committed to our service. That's all we can offer as an idea, sir). (Participant 9)*

The emergent theme is profoundly rooted in their profound dedication to the public's protection and service. Not only does this dedication entail the protection of their fellow citizens' lives, but it also provides a substantial sense of purpose and satisfaction. According to the participants, their positions in the PNP-SAF enabled them to have a significant impact, which in turn brought them personal fulfillment. The ability to positively impact the community and guarantee the safety and well-being of others, including their families, is the source of this sense of fulfillment.

PNP-SAF members' experiences may be analyzed using the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Deci and Ryan (2000) developed SDT, which underscores that intrinsic motivation is fueled by the satisfaction of three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The members' sense of personal gratification is consistent with the necessity for competence, as they perceive themselves as effective in their duties. Their sense of relatedness is further bolstered by their dedication to public service, which allows them to establish meaningful connections through their work. These psychological requirements are the foundation of the PNP-SAF members' profound sense of duty and satisfaction in their responsibilities, as they experience high motivation and job fulfillment.

Judge and Klinger (2008) discovered that job satisfaction is a substantial predictor of the overall contentment and life satisfaction of employees. Meaningful work, supportive colleagues, and work-life balance are all factors that contribute to job satisfaction. The research also underscored that individuals who regard their work as meaningful and consistent with their values are more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Dizon and Aguillon (2020) showed that members of the PNP-SAF's profound dedication to protection and service to the public is profoundly ingrained in their sense of obligation. This dedication not only ensures the safety of everyone around oneself but also provides a substantial sense of purpose and satisfaction. The informants expressed that their responsibilities in the PNP-SAF enabled them to make a significant impact, which brought them personal gratification. This satisfaction is derived from their capacity to make a positive impact on the community and guarantee the safety and well-being of others, including their families.

#### **4.1.1.2 Recognition from the Community.**

The participants highlighted the SAF members' profound commitment to assisting and serving the communities. Through initiatives such as the Revitalized Police Programs, the SAF has effectively established the public's trust and respect. The community has acknowledged the positive effects of these efforts, which has enhanced their sense of pride in their contributions to the nation's safety and well-being.

*(Yes sir, during my time in the PNP SAF, one of the most significant outcomes has been earning the respect and trust of the people. They see the police as ready to help, and this trust and respect are very important to us). (Participant 3)*

*(Additionally, we have the Revitalized Police Programs in barangays. Through this program, our SAF units go to remote areas to implement various projects. For example, in flood-affected areas, we build bridges to facilitate transportation and ensure safety. We also conduct medical missions to build relationships with the community and gain their trust). (Participant 10)*

Morale and work satisfaction among SAF members demonstrate the emergent theme. The participants observed that the public's trust and respect had been substantially enhanced as a result of the profound commitment of SAF members to assist and serve their communities through a variety of initiatives, including the Revitalized Police Programs. This favorable response from the community has not only substantiated their endeavors but also heightened their sense of pride in their role in promoting the safety and welfare of the nation. Their dedication and sense of fulfillment in their duties are further bolstered by the community's recognition of their hard work.

The participants' experiences can be effectively elucidated by applying the Social Exchange Theory (SET). According to Social Exchange Theory, social behavior results from an exchange process designed to optimize benefits and reduce costs (Blau, 1964). The SAF members' dedication to community service can be interpreted as an investment in social capital, which generates public trust and respect benefits. This reciprocal relationship further strengthens the members' sense of pride and gratification as they receive recognition and acknowledgment for their efforts. The SAF members are encouraged to continue their dedicated service by the positive feedback from the community, which serves as a substantial recompense. Consequently, a cycle of mutual benefit and reinforcement is established.

Johnson and Lee (2021) examined the influence of community engagement on the job satisfaction and morale of law enforcement officers. The researchers discovered that officers' sense of pride and fulfillment in their duties is substantially enhanced by community trust and respect. Officers' efforts were found to be substantiated, and their sense of purpose was enhanced by initiatives that involved active community engagement and service. The research determined that the morale and job satisfaction

of law enforcement personnel are significantly enhanced by the recognition and support of the community, which bolsters their commitment to public safety and welfare.

Paat and Baring (2021) discovered that PNP officers encounter substantial obstacles in reconciling their professional and personal lives, primarily as a result of high-pressure situations and demanding work schedules. Police officers who reported a more favorable work-life balance also reported higher levels of job satisfaction despite the obstacles they faced. Job satisfaction was significantly improved by factors such as supportive leadership, community recognition, and meaningful work. Their morale and job satisfaction were substantially impacted by the community's acknowledgment and appreciation, which reaffirmed their commitment to their responsibilities.

#### **4.1.1.3 Influence on Community Peace and Order.**

The participants expressed SAF's impactful programs and services have significantly influenced peace and order in the community, including counter-insurgency operations. The SAF has established an atmosphere of safety through initiatives such as conducting medical missions and constructing infrastructure in remote regions. People are reassured that they have someone to rely on by their presence, which brings a sense of security.

*(It's heartwarming to see an image of helping, not just for the PNP SAF but for the entire PNP. People should view the PNP differently, recognizing that they are not overly strict and that they know how to interact well with the public. This is also what I want for the PNP SAF, to build a positive relationship with the community. People should not be afraid; they should see that PNP officers are approachable and kind). (Participant 4)*

*(We cannot deny that our primary mission is to assist and protect the community against those who wish to harm them. Personally, I am happy to be part of the positive changes in our government and country. I want to protect not only others but also my own family. It is an honor for us to be part of the Special Action Force, serving and safeguarding the community). (Participant 6)*

*(The significant changes made by the Special Action Force (SAF) during its tenure in our government are due to our programs and service to the nation. Our operations, such as counter-insurgency missions, ensure safety and security in the areas where our police are present, as people feel secure knowing they have someone to rely on. The SAF unit has brought about impactful changes during major operations like the Marawi siege Zamboanga siege, and even during the pandemic, facing these challenges alongside the government. These changes include increased manpower and strengthened relationships between our police and the community, significantly improving the overall situation). (Participant 7)*

The SAF's programs and services have had a profound impact on community peace and order, which exemplifies the emergent theme. The SAF has been instrumental in the improvement of safety and stability by implementing a variety of impactful initiatives, such as counter-insurgency operations, according to the informants. The residents have not only experienced an improvement in their living conditions, but they have also developed a sense of security as a result of initiatives such as infrastructure development and medical missions in remote regions. The SAF's presence in the community provides community members with the assurance that they can rely on a dependable force, which is a substantial factor in the maintenance of a peaceful and stable environment.

Based on Social Capital Theory, the SAF's impact on community peace and safety can be realized. According to Social Capital Theory, networks, norms, and trust facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). The SAF's initiatives, including infrastructure projects and medical missions, contribute to developing robust networks and cultivating trust within the community. The SAF fortifies social bonds and fosters a sense of collective security by addressing critical requirements and improving the quality of life. The overall social capital is enhanced by the trust and cooperation between the SAF and the community members, resulting in a more tranquil and orderly society.

According to Carter and Rausch (2021), the safety and stability of local communities were considerably improved by community-oriented programs, including infrastructure support, public health initiatives, and regular police-community interactions. These initiatives nurtured a sense of security and well-being by fostering trust between law enforcement agencies and residents. The presence of dedicated and reliable police forces provided community members with a sense of security, resulting in a more tranquil and stable environment. The study underscored the importance of community recognition and engagement in bolstering the efficacy of these programs.

Tan and Cruz (2023) revealed that the SAF's diverse initiatives, such as infrastructure development projects, medical missions, and counter-terrorism operations, have substantially enhanced safety and stability in remote regions. In addition to improving living conditions, these initiatives have also promoted a sense of security among residents. The presence of SAF was perceived as a dependable agency for preserving peace by community members, who reported feeling reassured by their presence.

#### **4.1.2 Negative Experiences**

##### **4.1.2.1 Financial Constraints and Limited Resources.**

The participants expressed concerns regarding the financial obstacles that are impacting their operations. They observed that funds are not always readily accessible, particularly for unexpected job operations. They cannot fulfill their responsibilities due to a lack of financial resources, which results in frustration and hazardous situations in which they cannot meet essential requirements such as sustenance. They reiterated the necessity of additional funding from the government and higher-ranking officials to facilitate urgent operations. This budget deficit substantially impedes the PNP program's advancement.

*(Regarding that question, sir, my concern is that we don't always have funds readily available, especially for sudden job operations. When there are no available funds due to urgency, even though we want to carry out our operations, we can't proceed due to a lack of financial resources. This situation is discouraging and puts us at risk because we can't even provide for basic needs like food. It's really difficult for us, sir. That's why we urgently need support from our higher officials and the government. To clarify, for our planned operations, there is a budget allocated. My concern is specifically for urgent situations where there is no available budget). (Participant 3)*

*(The key issue is budgeting. Without a budget, it's impossible to fund and realize these programs. This is a significant problem. However, with a budget in place, the implementation of these initiatives becomes feasible and straightforward). (Participant 4)*

*(Lack of budget is indeed a significant factor, sir, that prevents the PNP program from moving forward). (Participant 5)*

The participants are deeply concerned about the emergent theme of financial constraints and limited resources because it directly affects their capacity to complete their responsibilities efficiently. They emphasized that funds are not always readily accessible, particularly for unforeseen operations. The need for more financial resources results in hazardous situations and frustration, as they are unable to fulfill basic needs, such as sustenance. The participants emphasized the importance of securing additional funding from the government and higher-ranking officials to facilitate urgent operations. The budget deficit significantly impedes the PNP program's progress, thereby influencing its overall effectiveness and capacity to respond to emergencies.

Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) can be employed to explain the financial constraints the PNP encounters. Organizations depend on external resources for survival, and the acquisition and administration of these resources are essential to their success, according to Resource Dependency Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The PNP's operations are significantly reliant on financial resources provided by the government and other external entities, as per RDT. Operational inefficiencies and constraints are generated when these resources are insufficient or delayed. The absence of funding impedes their capacity to fulfill critical responsibilities, resulting in increased hazards and frustration. In order to address these challenges, the PNP must actively pursue additional funding and resources, emphasizing the significance of strategic management and external relations in addressing their financial requirements.

Jones and Newburn (2020) discovered that their inadequate financial resources significantly impede the effectiveness of police forces in fulfilling their responsibilities. The research emphasized that officers who are unable to fulfill essential operational requirements experience frustration and hazardous conditions as a result of financial constraints. The advancement and effectiveness of police programs were significantly impeded by budgetary deficiencies, which impacted their overall capacity to respond to emergencies and maintain public safety.

Similarly, Reyes and Villanueva observed that the capacity of SAF members to fulfill their responsibilities effectively is substantially affected by financial constraints and scarcity of resources. The informants stated that funds are not always readily accessible, particularly for unforeseen operations, which results in frustration. The study emphasized that the government and higher-ranking officials must provide additional funding to support essential operations. The budget deficit significantly impedes the PNP program's progress, thereby influencing its overall effectiveness and capacity to respond to emergencies.

##### **4.1.2.2 Familial Longings while on Mission.**

The participants emphasized that SAF members cannot select their deployment locations, which leads to frustration as they are separated from their loved ones. Additionally, they conferred on the additional burden of red alert scenarios, which restrict their mobility. For instance, when a family member becomes sick, they cannot return home immediately, exacerbating their familial longing.

*(Secondly, when my family encounters problems or troubles, such as illness, and I can't go home immediately due to being on red alert at work, it becomes very frustrating since our movements are limited). (Participant 1)*



*The negative experience is that my child is now 8 years old, and out of those 8 years, we were only together for about a year, and even that was sporadic. I didn't get to witness their growth, relying solely on video calls. I have two kids, and I missed seeing them grow up. When there are problems or emergencies at home, you can't go because you're only given a few days off. Even if you are granted leave, the travel time might take two days, leaving you with just one day at home. Instead of spending on transportation, it's often more practical to send money to cover their needs. I've had to do that several times). (Participant 2)*

*(As members of the Special Action Force, we cannot choose our assignments, which can place us in Visayas, Luzon, or Mindanao. Often, our frustration comes from being away from our loved ones. However, the PNP has a 'reassignment' program to help us stay closer to our families. To cope with this, we must condition our minds to be prepared for these frustrations as SAF members. Our assignments are not fixed, and we can be deployed anywhere. This is a commitment we have pledged to uphold). (Participant 7)*

The participants' inability to select their deployment locations serves as an illustration of the emergent theme. This lack of control results in frustration, as members are frequently separated from their loved ones. Additionally, their mobility is restricted by red alert scenarios, which further exacerbates their burden. SAF members are unable to return home promptly in such circumstances, even if a family member becomes unwell. This can exacerbate their emotional distress and feelings of familial longing.

Role Conflict Theory may be used to explain this emergent theme. Role Conflict Theory proposes that individuals experience tension and strain when they encounter incompatible demands from their roles (Kahn et al., 1964). SAF members encounter character conflict between their professional obligations and their familial obligations. The conflict between their role as family members and as protectors of public safety is exacerbated by the inability to select deployment locations and the restrictions imposed during red alert scenarios. This conflict results in emotional strain and frustration as they reconcile their professional responsibilities with their personal and familial necessities.

Smith and Paterson (2019) identified that officers experience substantial emotional strain and frustration as a result of their inability to select deployment locations, which frequently results in extended separations from their families. The study also discovered that officers' capacity to attend to family exigencies is further restricted by high-alert situations, which exacerbates their emotional distress and familial yearning.

Garcia and Santos (2022) reported that SAF members experienced substantial frustration as a result of being separated from their loved ones for extended periods. The study also emphasized that red alert scenarios exacerbate these challenges by restricting members' mobility, thereby prohibiting them from attending to family emergencies. SAF members experience increased emotional distress and feelings of longing as a result of their inability to respond to familial requirements and their lack of control over deployment. The researchers recommended that policy modifications be made to account for the personal circumstances of SAF members in order to address these obstacles.

#### **4.1.2.3 Infiltration in Hotspot Areas.**

The participants observed that, despite the general stability of the situation, unforeseen issues may arise in any location in Negros. Insurgency is a consistently present danger, regardless of its location. The participants noted that certain regions are already challenging to access due to their mountainous terrain, and the insurgents' integration with civilian communities has further complicated their task. Furthermore, the insurgents were already receiving support from hotspot locations, and information regarding police operations was disseminated rapidly, rendering them ineffective.

*(In the areas of concern here in Negros, things are generally stable at the moment. However, problems can arise unexpectedly, even in quiet areas. Insurgency doesn't target specific places; it can happen anywhere. The most challenging areas to address are Tuboso, Escalante, and Calatrava. Since my assignment here, these areas have been particularly difficult due to their mountainous terrain, which provides a haven for rebels. The rebels blend with civilian communities, making it hard to identify them. In contrast, we are easily identifiable to the rebels because we are in police uniform). (Participant 3)*

*(It's not hard, but in remote areas like the mountains where the Aetas live, they truly need assistance. It's important to help those in the mountains and change their mindset and heart. By doing so, they will see that PNP officers are kind and willing to provide food and support). (Participant 4)*

*(In the northern part of Negros, particularly in areas like Calatrava, Tuboso, and Escalante, we often face burnout despite conducting multiple operations. This is because the majority of the people there support the rebels, and information about our arrival spreads quickly, making our operations ineffective). (Participant 5)*

The persistent resistance and support in hotspot regions were emphasized as a significant challenge for the SAF Commandos by the emergent theme. In Negros, insurgency remains a persistent menace, despite the general stability. Unforeseen complications may arise at any time. The challenge is further exacerbated in regions that are already difficult to access due to their mountainous terrain. The integration of insurgents with civilian communities further complicates the SAF's endeavors. Furthermore, these hotspot locations provide support to the insurgents, and the rapid dissemination of information regarding police operations renders them ineffective. The constant threat and complexity impede the SAF's capacity to effectively maintain peace and order.

Using Situational Crime Prevention Theory, it is possible to understand the obstacles the SAF encounters in addressing persistent resistance in priority regions. The primary objective of Situational Crime Prevention Theory is to mitigate the potential for criminal activity by implementing targeted measures that address the environmental and situational factors that encourage criminal behavior (Clarke, 1980). In this context, the integration of insurgents within civilian communities and the challenging geography present situational opportunities for resistance. The rapid dissemination of information regarding police operations among insurgents also indicates a failure to regulate situational factors. This theory posits that the SAF must develop strategies addressing these environmental and situational factors to counter-insurgency effectively. These strategies include the deployment of technology to monitor and respond to insurgent activities, the enhancement of community relations, and the improvement of intelligence operations.

According to Johnson and Thompson (2021), insurgency remains a persistent threat in numerous regions worldwide, particularly those with difficult geographical characteristics, such as mountainous terrain. These operations are further complicated by the integration of insurgents with civilian communities, as insurgents receive support and information dissemination is rapid, resulting in a loss of effectiveness for police and military operations. The study underscored the significance of augmenting intelligence operations and devising community-based strategies to enhance the efficacy of counter-insurgency efforts.

## ***4.2 Addressing the Challenges Encountered by the Informants in the Implementation of Counterterrorism Programs***

### ***4.2.1 Coordination and Collaboration with Other Agencies.***

The participants pointed out that the resolution of the insurgency is not solely the responsibility of the PNP or SAF; the most effective approach necessitates the collaboration of all parties. Interagency coordination and collaboration are essential, as they involve not only the police but also other government units and agencies, including the Department of Education (DEP-ED) and local government units. The government's objective of ending or suppressing insurgency requires a collaborative effort from various sectors.

*(To effectively respond to counterterrorism, the cooperation of the outside community with SAF is crucial. Our superiors and officials, along with our counterparts and the community, must provide support to solve counter-terrorism challenges. Another important aspect is our relationship with our counterparts. Given the seriousness of the problem and the weight of the mission, we coordinate with other counterparts like the Philippine Army and other PNP Mobile Forces to focus on the "white area." This white area is a significant problem for us here in Negros, sir). (Participant 1)*

*(In that case, sir, we cannot solve it alone. We can only solve it by working together. The more people involved, the more ideas we can gather, leading to better outcomes for our operations. Since there are many of us, we coordinate on what actions to take, share our ideas, and then select the best one to apply to the area we are targeting. Our plans become more effective when we gather facts and information and then prioritize them, starting with Plan A. If that doesn't work, we have Plan B ready and even Plan C, ensuring a positive outcome). (Participant 3)*

*(To effectively end insurgency through counter-insurgency operations, it's not solely the responsibility of the PNP or the SAF. The best strategy involves everyone working together through inter-agency coordination and collaboration. It's essential for other units and government agencies, such as the Department of Education (DEP-ED) and local government units, to be involved. Only by working together can we achieve the government's goals. Ending or suppressing insurgency requires a collective effort from various agencies, not just the police). (Participant 7)*

The emergent theme underscored the necessity of comprehensive coordination and collaboration among various agencies in order to resolve the insurgency issue rather than relying solely on the efforts of the PNP or SAF. Not only law enforcement but also other government units and agencies, including the Department of Education (DepEd) and local government units, are essential for the effective management of insurgency. By uniting resources, expertise, and strategies from various sectors, the government can achieve its goal of ending or suppressing insurgency. This interagency collaboration guarantees a comprehensive approach that addresses the fundamental causes and impacts of insurgency on various societal levels.

The significance of coordination and collaboration with other agencies in insurgency can be better understood through the lens of Collaborative Governance Theory. According to Collaborative Governance Theory, the successful resolution of public issues necessitates the collaboration of numerous stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-profit organizations, and community groups (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This theory posits that complex issues, such as terrorism, cannot be resolved by a single entity and necessitate a networked approach in which various organizations collaborate to achieve a shared objective. In the PNP and SAF context, a more comprehensive and integrated strategy is facilitated by the involvement of other government agencies, such as the Department of Education and local government units. Ultimately, this collaboration results in a more effective resolution of terrorism by improving resource allocation, policy implementation, and community engagement.

Walker and Smith (2020) found that effective insurgency resolution necessitates the coordination of efforts across a variety of sectors, such as education, local governance, social services, and law enforcement. The research emphasized that the integration of resources, expertise, and strategies from various sectors improves the efficacy of counter-insurgency operations. This comprehensive strategy not only addresses the immediate security concerns but also the underlying social, economic, and political factors that contribute to insurgency.

Hernandez and Bautista (2022) underscored that the resolution of insurgency necessitates comprehensive coordination and collaboration among various agencies rather than relying solely on the efforts of the PNP-SAF. The investigation determined that the government's goal of eliminating or suppressing insurgency can be achieved by uniting resources, expertise, and strategies from various sectors. This interagency collaboration guarantees a comprehensive approach that addresses the fundamental causes and impacts of insurgency on various societal levels.

#### **4.2.2 Community Engagement and Trust-Building Programs.**

The participants deliberated on the potential solution to prevent the spread of insurgency through community engagement and trust-building programs facilitated by a visible and sustained police presence. They also observed that establishing SAF (Special Action Force) units in the region was recommended to improve the public's perception of the efficacy of the police, not only through operations but also by revitalizing local police initiatives. They noticed that these initiatives fostered trust and averted insurgency by illustrating the beneficial influence of the police on the community.

*(That's why, at present, we have the Revitalize Police in every barangay to disrupt the roots of these leftist movements. We need to break their foothold in the "white areas" because that's where it all starts. These areas are the breeding grounds for recruitment and armed struggle due to the political works of the opposing rebels. Despite our efforts, eradicating this issue has been challenging. When we refer to "white areas," sir, we mean schools, universities, and public places where rebels use legal fronts. These fronts can't be charged as illegal because they appear legitimate on the surface, but underneath, they support underground leftist movements. These are the critical areas we need to focus on to counter these activities). (Participant 1)*

*(Here in PNP SAF, I am a Police Community Relations officer, handling community relations in the area where I am assigned. It's important for people to understand that while the PNP SAF might have different roles and responsibilities, fundamentally, all units within the PNP share the same core values and objectives). (Participant 4)*

*(One possible solution is to ensure the presence of SAF units in the area so people feel that the police are genuinely there, not just through operations but also through long-term community engagement. As our colleague mentioned earlier, programs like the Revitalized Police in the Barangay, similar to the previous CWAU or RCSB programs, are vital. These long-term initiatives help maintain a police presence and involve community service projects, such as those in schools. In our area, many communities are in mountainous regions, making it difficult for some to access schools. The PNP has taken steps to improve roads, beautify schools, fix water systems, and provide basic needs. These efforts are crucial in preventing the spread or escalation of insurgency because they demonstrate the tangible work we are doing to support and improve the community). (Participant 7)*

The emergent theme highlighted the significance of community engagement and trust-building initiatives as potential solutions to insurgency. The participants emphasized the necessity of a consistent presence of SAF units in the region to guarantee that the police are not only visible during operations but are also actively engaged in community life. The objective of initiatives like the Revitalized Police in the Barangay program is to ensure a lasting police presence in the community. In this manner, SAF can establish trust and demonstrate their dedication to the community's welfare by addressing practical issues that impact daily life, particularly in mountainous regions where access to resources is difficult.

Procedural Justice Theory provides a framework for conceptualizing the efficacy of community engagement and trust-building initiatives in combating insurgency. As presented by Tyler (2006), Procedural Justice Theory posits that individuals' assessments of the equity of the procedures employed to allocate resources and make decisions are essential for establishing trust and

cooperation. A commitment to the fair and just treatment of community members is demonstrated by assuring a visible and active presence in the community and engaging in initiatives that directly enhance the quality of life in the context of the PNP and SAF. Trust and legitimacy are fostered when the police are perceived as transparent, equitable, and authentically concerned with the community's well-being. Fostering a cooperative relationship between the authorities and the community is contingent upon this trust, which is essential for preventing the spread of insurgency.

Kelling and Bratton (2019) emphasized the significance of an ongoing police presence and active participation in community life. Police can establish trust and exhibit their dedication to the community's welfare by interacting with the community and addressing common issues, according to the research. This method prevents the spread of insurgency by demonstrating the tangible benefits of police efforts and nurturing a positive relationship between law enforcement and the community.

Ramos and De Vera (2021) underscored the necessity of a consistent presence of SAF units in the region to guarantee that the police are actively engaged in community life rather than solely during operations. The program encompasses community service initiatives, including the enhancement of roads, the enhancement of schools, the repair of water systems, and the provision of necessities. These initiatives are designed to resolve practical issues that impact daily life, particularly in mountainous regions with restricted access to resources. The research determined that the police are able to prevent the spread or escalation of insurgency by demonstrating their commitment to the community's well-being and building trust by actively addressing these issues. This approach also demonstrates the positive impact of police efforts.

### **4.3 Aspirations of the Informants to Improve the Implementation of Counterterrorism Programs**

#### **4.3.1 Continuous Training and Skills Development.**

The participants highlighted the importance of remedial training before participating in missions, particularly those in unfamiliar locations. This training, alongside preliminary surveillance and intelligence gathering, guarantees that the team is adequately prepared and knowledgeable of the environment in which they will be operating. They emphasized that each training session imparts vital skills and knowledge; the more training they receive, the more ideas and techniques they can share.

*(I hope they conduct more free training sessions so that personnel are encouraged to attend without worrying about the cost. These sessions are beneficial because they enhance our skills. However, we often lack the budget for essential supplies, like bullets. For instance, when we need to refresh our training, we sometimes have to spend our own money, which can amount to around 100,000. This is a significant amount that could be used for other purposes. Often, we save money specifically for investment, but we end up using it for training, even taking loans to cover the costs. The money we saved is then gone, and if we don't continually practice what we've learned, we risk forgetting it. Consistent and free training is crucial to ensure that we retain and refine our skills without financial strain). (Participant 2)*

*(Refresher training is essential. Each training session provides us with new skills and knowledge, and the more training we have, the more ideas we can acquire and share with our colleagues. That's why we suggest continuing the refresher training and ensuring that all members are given the opportunity to participate. This will help us stay sharp and effective in our duties). (Participant 6)*

*(For me, before engaging in a mission, we should have a refresher, especially in unfamiliar locations. Conducting surveillance first is crucial. As my expertise is in intelligence, I would enter the location first, gather details, and then plan accordingly. Understanding the layout, identifying key points like the main door, and familiarizing ourselves with the environment helps prevent accidents and casualties. This preparation ensures that the troops are aware of the room's contents before entering. Therefore, a refresher before engaging in an operation is essential for preparedness and safety). (Participant 8)*

The emergent theme emphasized the critical significance of continuous training and skill development for SAF members, particularly before they participated in missions in unfamiliar locations. By conducting remedial training in conjunction with preliminary surveillance and intelligence gathering, the team is guaranteed to be well-informed and prepared for the operational environment. Each training session provides members with essential skills and knowledge, enabling them to exchange ideas and techniques. This ongoing learning process significantly improves their overall preparedness and efficacy, allowing them to address a variety of unanticipated challenges more effectively.

The significance of ongoing skill development and training can be effectively elucidated by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory posits that learning is a process in which knowledge is generated by transforming experience. As per ELT, effective learning is characterized by a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Each training session is a tangible experience providing SAF members with practical skills and knowledge. They can analyze and comprehend their experiences through reflective observation, while abstract conceptualization enables them to create new strategies and techniques. Active experimentation entails continuously improving

the capabilities and preparedness of these new concepts and techniques by implementing them in real-world scenarios. This perpetual cycle of learning guarantees that SAF members are perpetually adapting and enhancing their abilities to address new challenges, a critical component of their field effectiveness.

Roberts and Palmer (2021) addressed the significance of remedial training, preliminary surveillance, and intelligence gathering as key components in the preparation of officers for missions in unfamiliar environments. The research discovered that continuous training cultivates a culture of shared ideas and techniques among team members, imparting critical skills and knowledge. This continuous learning process significantly improves operational effectiveness and overall preparedness, allowing officers to address diverse and unforeseen challenges more effectively. The findings emphasize the importance of ongoing training programs to guarantee a high level of readiness and effectiveness in law enforcement operations.

#### **4.3.2 Adequate Financial and Logistical Support.**

The participants underlined the importance of upgrading their equipment to improve operational capability. They emphasized that their instruments and technology must evolve with changing times. Given the changing nature of risks and challenges, depending on outdated equipment is no longer feasible. It is imperative to upgrade their technology and apparatus to maintain a competitive edge, particularly in light of the possibility that rebels may employ more sophisticated technology.

*(In my profession as a member of the Special Action Force, what we need to develop first is the provision of more financial support for our training and schooling, as well as logistical support. Financial and logistical support are crucial because our job knowledge and skills are only as effective as the resources available to us. Without adequate funding and equipment, it's challenging to perform our duties effectively). (Participant 1)*

*(We also need new vehicles, sir, including armored vehicles or tanks for warfare, as we currently don't have those here in Negros. The only ones with such equipment are the Special Action Force units in other companies). (Participant 5)*

*(As for supplies, sir, we also need to enhance our operational capability. This means that as times change, our equipment should also be updated. We can't rely on old equipment because the current environment and challenges are different from the past. As we upgrade our technology, we must also upgrade the equipment we use. Innovation is crucial because the rebels might be using more advanced technology than we are. Ensuring that we have up-to-date and high-tech equipment is essential to maintain our effectiveness and safety in operations). (Participant 7)*

The emergent theme stressed the urgent necessity for financial and logistical assistance to enhance their operational capabilities and modernize their equipment. They emphasized the importance of adapting their instruments and technology to the evolving nature of hazards and the changing times. It is no longer feasible to depend on obsolete equipment, as it places them at a disadvantage, particularly when confronted with adversaries who may possess more advanced technology. It is essential for them to upgrade their technology and equipment in order to preserve their competitive advantage and guarantee the safety and efficiency of their operations.

Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory effectively elucidates the prerequisite for financial and logistical support for equipment improvements. Barney (1991) introduced the Resource-Based View Theory, which contends that an organization's resources and capabilities are essential for establishing and maintaining a competitive advantage. Tangible resources (e.g., technology and apparatus) and ethereal resources (e.g., knowledge and skills) are indispensable for an organization to operate efficiently, as per RBV. For the SAF, possessing modern and sophisticated equipment is an essential tangible resource that improves its operational capabilities. This theory posits that investing in contemporary technology and equipment is imperative to address evolving challenges and maintain a competitive edge over prospective adversaries who may also be enhancing their resources. The SAF can enhance its efficiency, effectiveness, and overall operational success by ensuring its equipment remains in step with technological advancements.

Taylor and Johnson (2020) revealed that the efficacy and safety of law enforcement operations are substantially compromised by obsolete equipment. The study underlined the importance of law enforcement agencies upgrading their technology and apparatus to remain current with the changing nature of risks and adversaries' capabilities. It is essential to have financial and logistical support in order to acquire modern equipment and preserve a competitive advantage.

Reyes and Bautista (2022) investigated the urgent requirement for financial and logistical assistance to enhance the operational capabilities and instruments of the PNP-SAF. The informants stressed that it is no longer practicable to depend on antiquated equipment, as it places SAF members at a disadvantage, particularly in the face of enemies who possess more advanced technology. The study underscored the importance of instruments and technology adapting to the evolving character of hazards

and the changing times. The researchers determined that the SAF's equipment must be modernized, and their operational readiness must be improved through the provision of improved financial and logistical support.

## **5. Conclusion**

In summary, the SAF operatives and the PNP-SAF are the frontliners in implementing the government's counter-terrorism measures. Their experiences are characterized by both positive and negative aspects, with personal fulfillment, community recognition, and contributions to peace and order being motivating factors. However, they face significant obstacles, such as financial limitations, the strain of familial separation, and the risks associated with operating in hotspot areas. The participants identified coordination with other agencies and community engagement as key strategies for addressing these challenges. To enhance the effectiveness of counterterrorism initiatives, it is imperative to provide continuous training, as well as sufficient financial and logistical support. These improvements are crucial for increasing the SAF commandos' capacity to respond effectively to terrorism and insurgency. Allocating an appropriate budget and implementing the requisite enhancement trainings and programs may be able to increase the SAF Commandos' effectiveness in their fight against counterterrorism.

## **6. Study Limitations and Future Research**

The study was conducted in the Negros Island Region, which limits its scope. The results of the study may not represent the whole PNP SAF Unit since the research participants are only those assigned to the SAF units Negros Oriental and Negros Occidental. Therefore, the results, insights, and recommendations from this study may have limited significance beyond the selected research environments.

The current study's results provide insight into the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of the SAF commandos. Nevertheless, a number of implications for future research can further enhance our understanding of the lived experiences of the SAF commandos and PNP-SAF in general.

In the future, research could investigate the most effective training regimens and the specific physical demands of counterterrorism operations, which are crucial for enhancing the performance and well-being of SAF Commandos. Experimental studies that compare the effects of various training programs on physical performance, injury rates, and recovery should be the primary focus of future research. This will assist in creating training protocols optimized to improve physical endurance and resilience, thereby ensuring that commandos are physically prepared for the demands of their responsibilities.

Secondly, future research could evaluate the efficacy of various operational tactics and strategies implemented in counterterrorism initiatives, a critical area that requires further investigation. This investigation aims to identify optimal strategies and devise new techniques to enhance the success of missions, coordination, and response times. In order to develop more refined and effective counterterrorism strategies, comparative studies that involve various units and regions, as well as scenario-based simulations and after-action evaluations, can provide valuable data on what is most effective in various contexts.

Finally, future research will be conducted to ascertain the socio-political impact of counterterrorism programs on local communities and their perception of SAF Commandos, which is essential for developing trust and cooperation. Surveys, ethnographic studies, and focus groups should be implemented in future research to acquire insights into the perspectives and experiences of affected communities. By fostering positive relationships between operatives and their communities, this can aid in developing community engagement and public relations strategies, thereby improving the efficacy of counterterrorism operations.

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**ORCID iD:** <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6931-9078>

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