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The Psychological Selection of Officer Candidates in Austria

E. FRISE

Military Psychology Service
Ministry of Defence/ Austria
Maria Theresien-Kaserne, Am Fasangarten 2
A-1130 Wien
Austria

Summary:

Austria's psychological officers' selection is an integral part of the selection procedure for officers' training, which lasts for more than a year. During this psychological selection, which takes 22 hours, due to the use of selected stressors and a sleepless night not only intelligence and personality traits can be tested but also (by applying the concept of "Ergo-Psychometry") individual stress resistance.

Austria's military defence is based on obligatory national military service (Conscription System) for men., which is composed of 7 months basic service and 30 days 3 - 4 refresher training periods every two years. All male citizens are subject to the draft. So all young men are called up for mustering at an *induction centre*. Here they are examined as to whether they are fit for duty in physical and psychological respect. The psychological examination there is only a basic one - but *for officer candidates it's the first selection step*, they have to prove, that they are able to meet certain requirements. They need a qualification called "Maturity Examination" (entrance examination for college) and their physical and psychological performance must be better than that of other conscripts.

After this pre-selection every year in October approximately 800 officer candidates (Career and Reserve together) are inducted and sent to *special training units as "One-Year-Volunteers"* (they have to enlist for 6 additional month after the 7 months national service). In these units they receive 4 months basic and general military training.

During these 4 months all candidates must pass the "*Psychological Officer Selection Test*"

This rather long period is due to the fact that on the one hand there is a large number of candidates (800) and not enough psychologists, on the other hand certain psychological quality-standards have to be met.

This together with the necessity to fulfill the expectations of the military concerning a practice-orientated test system and the need to have the results for *immediate disposition* resulted in the following system:

Framework:

- Duration: 1 day (and one night) - 1400 hrs to 1200 hrs
- Max. number of candidates: 30
- Location: Military Installation
- Personnel: 1 Psychologist; 1-2 Assistants; Military Training Personnel
- Computation and Evaluation of Data: Immediately; computer-assisted
- Additional Aspects: 3-4 turns per week are possible (90 to 120 persons)

In cooperation with the military leadership and training experts we listed the *following abilities and properties*, which we think are indispensable for an officer and which are not only accepted by the military but can also be tested under the above mentioned conditions:

Intelligence:

First of all it is necessary to test some basic traits of intelligence. We found that general and verbal intelligence, reasoning and memory, have a high prognostic value. Other traits, such as concentration, perception, precision and practical intelligence (the ability to understand and perform complicated orders), we summed up as "Performance-Potential" and we know that this is very important for selection.

Stress Resistance:

Since it is nearly impossible to simulate all kinds of stress realistically, we decided to reduce the criteria for stress resistance to those, which can really be tested during the officer selection test and which correspond to the demands of field commanders. Last, but not least, they enable us to use "*Ergo-Psychometry*". The concept of Ergo-Psychometry postulates, that tests under load are more valid than tests under neutral conditions. The testing of stress resistance comprises

- sleep deprivation (one night)
- physical load (march and physical exercises)
- mental stress (primarily produced by sound)
- frustration (comparison between parallel - tests under neutral and under frustrating conditions) and

social exposure (to talk for a few minutes on a given topic without preparation, while critically watched by fellow-candidates and psychologist)

Ergo-Psychometry is used in the following way: Psychometric tests (Intelligence) are given firstly under neutral conditions, but are repeated in a parallel form after the sleepless night and tiring under mental stress. Even personality questionnaires have to be filled in after this exposure to stress. We have experienced, that under such conditions the candidates are too tired to control their answers in respect to social desirability.

Personality:

The main instrument for the testing of personality traits are two questionnaires. One is a commercial product, (Personality Research Form - PRF), the other was developed by our service to get traits and attitudes, which might influence directly the motivation for military service and the wish to become an officer. Also the behavior of the candidates during the test is critically watched by the psychologist. Especially while they work under physical and mental stress the psychologist may notice some peculiarities in behaviour. Lastly he has the possibility to complete and sum up all his information during a psychological interview. He then has to judge personality traits such as

- Emotional Stability,
- Social Competence and
- Motivation for being an officer

We assume that, even if under the given conditions we are not able to test all required abilities and properties as completely as we would want to. But we are certainly able to fulfill the principal demand of the military leadership: *To filter out the worst and to give an important contribution to further assessments.*

The psychological officer's selection test system:

Below the sequence of the individual tests of the psychological officers' selection system is described:

The officer selection test system *lasts 22 hours* - it starts at 1400 hrs and ends at about 1200 hrs the next day.

The *first part* lasts from 1400 to 1700 hrs: The candidates are tested with psychometric intelligence tests (paper pencil method, the data are calculated and rated by computer) - the test situation is neutral, there is no additional load.

From 1800 to about 2200 hrs the second part of the test takes place: Here we have qualitative tasks, which have the function of telling the psychologist something about attitudes and social and personality traits. For example the candidates have to state in written form the reasons, why they want to become officers, they have to complete sentences with special references, they have to talk for a short period on a given topic and discuss it, they have to reflect on their views on life, and similar tasks.

During the following night hours (2200 to 0500 hrs) the candidates are prevented from sleeping and they have to march a given distance and do written and physical exercises in between: By morning each of them should be stressed up to approximately 50 % of his physical and mental capacity. This is necessary for the next parts of the test.

From 0600 to 0800 hrs the candidates have to work out the personality questionnaires (as explained above). We have good reason to suppose, that their answers are more valid after the stressful night.

From 0800 to 1000 the parallel forms of some of the tests from the first part are given to the already very tired candidates, but now, according to the principles of Ergo-Psychometry, under load (noise and other stressors). The comparison between the neutral results and those after a sleepless night and additional mental stress help to determine individual stress resistance.

The *last part* of the test (1000 to 1200 hrs or longer) consists of interviews by the psychologist. Due to the computer-assisted rating and calculating of the data, the psychologist can be supplied with all the information for the test-period of all candidates (even with a rating proposal) by this time. After the interview with each aspirant he has to decide on the final ratings.

The possible qualifications are

- Well Qualified
- Qualified (the majority)
- Conditional qualification and
- Failed.

"Conditional Qualification" is given, if some weaknesses of a candidate could be compensated by good motivation or other strong points. In this case the commanding officer of this candidate has to assess the candidate's performance critically and finally decide, whether the aspirant should continue officers' training or not.

If the candidate fails the test, he is removed from officers' training and reassigned to another unit.

At the end of January the candidates have to pass the Reserve Officers' Examination Part I. For the rest of the "One Year Volunteer Training" Career and Reserve Officer Candidates are separated.

Career Officer Candidates

The Career Officer Candidates are sent in February on the so-called *Preparation Semester for the College for Military Leadership at the Military Academy*. During this semester they receive specialized infantry training and their level of proficiency is standardized.

Because the number of participants is limited, they have to undergo at the end of the Preparation Semester *assessment* for admittance to the College.

The criteria for this assessment are:

- relevant professional qualification and experience
- experience in military training
- physical fitness
- stress resistance
- social competence
- leadership potential
- adherence to democratic values
- foreign languages

This examination system is rather new and so the development of the methods and their evaluation has not been completed until now. Our Service and its psychologists take part in this development.

Finally a board consisting of field commanders, experts and psychologists has to fix the final qualification of each candidate by summing up all available ratings *including the result of the psychological officer selection test*.

If a candidate passes this assessment, he has to go on to a Practice Semester with an infantry unit. There he has to train and command an infantry squad. If he is successful, he can then enroll for officers' training at the College for Military Leadership, which lasts 3 years, after which he is graduated to Master of Military Leadership and promoted to 2nd Lieutenant.

Reserve Officer Candidates

At the beginning of February the Reserve Officer Candidates are transferred to the various branch schools. There they undergo specialized training specific for their arm or service and their individual function. At the end of August they have to pass the Reserve Officers' Examination Part II. The board is obliged to take into account the results of the psychological selection test when fixing the final rating.

Those, who have passed this examination continue their training until September. They receive practical training as squad leaders and they are introduced to their tasks as future officers. After having finished the One-Year-Volunteer-Training they can continue their military career by volunteering for the necessary reserve training courses. At earliest 4 ½ years after being inducted, the Reserve Officer Candidate can be promoted to 2nd Lieutenant.