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Choosing the Elite *Recmitment, Assessment, and Selection in Law Enforcement Tactical Teams and Military Special Forces*

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CHAPTER 18

Choosing the Elite

Recruitment, Assessment, and Selection in Law Enforcement Tactical Teams and Military Special Forces

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NYPD Emergency Service Unit

In the early morning hours of July 31, 2007, Gazi Abu Mezer and Lafi Khalil, two Palestinians who had entered the United States after exploiting loopholes in the immigration system, were in the operational phase of a planned suicide bombing of the New York City Transit system. Their weapons: simple pipe bombs with electrical detonating switches packed into knapsacks. Two things would stand in the way of their attempt at martyrdom—their Egyptian roommate and the New York City Police Department's Emergency Service Unit (ESU).

Mossabah, the roommate, had been taken to the New York Police Department's 88th Precinct. When the ESU tour commander, a veteran lieutenant, arrived at the precinct, he interviewed Mossabah, having him start at the beginning of his recollections, interrupting him for clarifications and details. After digesting what he had heard, the commander began apprising his leadership of the situation and stressing that he believed Mossabah. He then looked at the roster of ESU officers working his shift, from midnight to 8 a.m. The urgency of the situation prohibited him from calling in people from home and handpicking a team to enter the apartment Mossabah shared with the two suspects; he would have to go with those already available. The commander called a sergeant and four police officers and told them to meet him at the precinct.

After the five arrived, Mossabah was again asked to tell his story from the beginning. They interrupted him with even more questions

and requests for clarification and had him draw an extensive diagram of his apartment building's exterior and his apartment's interior, highlighting the locations of the backpacks as well as the spaces Mezer and Khalil normally occupied. The commander took his team into another room and devised his tactical plan, giving out assignments as they progressed. The team would execute a standard dynamic search warrant entry. Mossabah would lead them to the building, and they would enter using his key. The building the team saw upon exiting their vehicle looked nothing like the one Mossabah had sketched at the precinct. Thoughts of an ambush ran through the officers' minds. Mossabah then led the team through a narrow alley, at the end of which the team saw a building resembling the one he had drawn.

The lead officer, protected by a hand-held body bunker, put the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door. The team flooded the apartment, yelling, "Police! Get down on the floor!" The first officer through the door was met by a man who attempted to physically disarm him. The officer fired one shot from his 9-mm pistol, hitting his target. The wounded man stumbled backwards, toward a black canvas bag in the corner of the room. As he flipped one of four toggles on the front of the bag, another officer fired two 5.56-mm rounds into him, and he crumpled into a corner of the room. As the team pressed on, a second man in another room lunged toward a backpack in a corner. Two shots from an officer's pistol dropped him before he could reach it. The entry was over in less than ninety seconds. Both men were taken into custody.

The FBI reconstructed both backpack improvised explosive devices, determining them to be functional with a blast radius of more than 100 yards. Their analysis also revealed that the toggle thrown on the first backpack should have detonated the device. It is not known why it failed.

JOINING THE ELITE

This incident highlights the challenges faced by leaders of law enforcement tactical teams: A crisis situation arises suddenly. Urgency calls for action. There is no time to handpick a response team. The leader must work with whoever is on duty. What can a law enforcement leader do to ensure that whoever is working counts among the best the agency has? Perhaps through a framework for a selection process of tactical teams that ensures transparency, provides a multilayered approach for weeding out the unqualified, and has a multitiered means of selecting from the strongest of the remaining candidates those capable of performing in dangerous, high-stress operations.

The Emergency Service Unit, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), Emergency Response Team, and Emergency Incident Team are a few of the types of outfits called upon to handle and diffuse the most complex and dangerous situations law enforcement officers encounter. They deal with armed, barricaded suspects, hostage situations, shooters, and high-risk search warrants. It is sometimes said that when the public needs help, they call the police; when the police need help, they call Emergency Service. How does one become a member of these elite units? More important, how do leaders select applicants for assignment to the agency's special response teams? The process is similar to that of any other job: recruitment, an interview (selection), and training followed by a probationary period (assessment). The recruitment, selection, and assessment "training" procedures of three high-performing and high-stakes organizations will be examined here.

Recruitment

Although some officers will "walk in" to apply to join a unit, implementing a formal recruitment program lends legitimacy as well as transparency to the process. It also helps debunk the myth of an "old boy" network, possibly preventing future allegations of exclusion, and improve diversity. Two recommended courses of action are publication of a formal bulletin along with briefings or presentations to roll calls department wide.

Publication and dissemination of a bulletin serves several purposes. It reaches the largest pool of potential applicants because it is distributed throughout the department. The bulletin should clearly state the minimum requirements for assignment as time in service, education, special skills, evaluations, and physical requirements if any. Department-wide roll call presentations, given by members of the unit, validate the inclusiveness of the recruitment process and allow prospective applicants the ability to pose questions to unit members. The application form itself should allow the applicant to provide a detailed assignment history covering their entire career. Additional information might include education, prior military service, and special skills. It should also include a section in which the applicant can explain why he or she should be selected and what they would bring to the unit. No application should be considered without a signed recommendation and comments from the applicant's commanding officer.

Selection

The next step in the process is an oral interview. Any commander of a law enforcement tactical unit who does not conduct oral interviews for applicants

to their team is committing a grave error. There is simply no other way to fully appraise an applicant than through a face-to-face meeting. Prior to conducting interviews, complete packages for all of the applicants must be assembled that include at a minimum the completed application, the applicant's previous evaluations and personnel file (or a synopsis of the latter), disciplinary records, and details of any previous firearms discharges, force complaints, and open internal investigations. Applicants with multiple firearms discharges or force complaints and open internal investigations must be rigorously evaluated.

The interview panel should include frontline and ranking or executive-level supervisors. The ranking officers should not only chair the interview, but ask the majority of the questions. This tactic allows the panel to gauge the applicant's ability to interact with ranking officers, that is, to operate in a somewhat stressful situation. Being able to function and communicate well under stress is a requirement of any member of a law enforcement tactical team. At the scene of a major event, the incident commander will usually want to confer and coordinate directly with the members of the tactical team. Team members must be able to calmly and coherently respond and not be intimidated by rank. Asking applicants about their hobbies, off-duty activities, and volunteer or community service offers insight into the person rather than the officer. There are two main methods of conducting an interview: asking direct questions or asking situational questions. In the direct method, questions will elicit either a negative or an affirmative answer. Usually these questions focus on integrity and procedure. The situational method, in which the applicant is presented with a situation and asked to indicate how he or she would respond, requires more detailed answers. Some situational questions should not and do not have a right or wrong answer. The objective is to evaluate the applicant's analytical skills and gain insight into their decision-making process. For instance, a sample situation might probe their response to an active shooter on a crowded playground. Another method to evaluate a candidate's analytical ability is to provide them with a written, mechanical-reasoning test whose goal is not to evaluate their mechanical abilities but rather their analytical ability.

There are many reasons why a police officer wants to become a member of their department's tactical team. Some relish the challenge and want to belong to an elite unit. Others have prior military service and enjoy the camaraderie of a small unit with a specific mission. One type looking to join the team that must be identified during the oral interview is the one enthralled by the "glamour factor," whose sole desire is to be near the action and to look good in the tactical uniform. These people tend not to be team oriented. Posing situational questions where the desired answers are team focused will

help identify them. Fortunately, glory seekers rarely pass the team-related parts of the physical tests.

The use of heavy body armor, additional weapons, and equipment combined, with the often drawn-out time frames of tactical situations require team members to be in excellent physical condition. A physical fitness exam can help determine a candidate's overall level of fitness and endurance and commitment to a personal fitness program. Some departments use a military-style physical fitness test to evaluate applicants' levels of fitness, but collective bargaining agreements may preclude an agency from using this method. An alternative is a test comprised of job-specific tasks, such as but not limited to a timed stair climb while wearing tactical equipment and carrying tools, moving and carrying heavy equipment, and simulated door ramming. The list is limited only by the imagination. As long as the task is job specific, it should survive a union grievance. During the test, instructors and evaluators should ratchet up the mental stress but refrain from hazing candidates.

A tactical law enforcement officer must be able to function in a high-stress environment, often for an extended period. The applicant must be able to deal with the physical and mental stress while preventing his personal feelings and emotions from interfering with a safe resolution of the incident. Also, some incidents will be ended by the application of deadly physical force. The interview process and the physical should weed out the majority of unacceptable candidates, but no system is perfect; one or two undesirables may give all the right answers in an interview and max the physical. Interviewing well and being in good shape does not automatically translate into being qualified for selection. Instinct, or gut feeling, is one of a police officer's greatest tools. If during the selection process a member of the selection committee thinks that something just doesn't feel right about an applicant, his or her instinct is probably right. The applicant should not be selected for assignment.

Training

After the interviews and physicals and selection process, the next step is training. Most large departments have a formal training school, but smaller ones may only have a field training, or an on-the-job program, where the newly assigned are mentored by a senior team member. Regardless of the size or the location, the training program must be structured and formalized with clearly measurable objectives for each part of the curriculum. The training curriculum should be focused on the unit's mission. Some units may encompass all aspects of a tactical situation, ranging from breaching, to hostage negotiation, to rendering explosives safe. Others may focus on breaching and subject

apprehension. Regardless of the team's mission, the student's initial training curriculum must cover each aspect of its core function.

Selection for training does not guarantee selection for the unit. Regardless of a trainee's rank, the cadre must be in charge. The training program should be mentally and physically taxing while devoid of hazing. The tactical team and the department's leadership must give the cadre the authority to remove any trainee for unsatisfactory performance. Prior to the start of training, students should be provided with a list of the required standards for performance in training. Flagrant safety violations, such as accidental discharges and unsafe weapons handling, should be automatic cause for dismissal. Upon completion of the training program, the new team member should be assigned to a senior team member for assessment. This officer acts as a field training officer and mentor for at least six months. A newly assigned team member should not be considered fully qualified for at least twelve to eighteen months after completion of his or her training.

U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES

The Taliban move freely throughout Helmand province in Afghanistan. They run a well-established web of safe houses that crisscross the desert, shuttling resources throughout the area. These "rat lines" are numerous, flexible, and almost invisible, but are the key leads to finding and capturing Taliban leaders and their large caches of equipment and supplies. In fall 2009 Captain M and his Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (SFODA) team of twelve men sought to disrupt one of these networks and question the men involved. They planned and executed a five-day operation equivalent in size and scope to managing a large multinational corporation. It involved more than 200 soldiers, civilians, and support personnel. Captain M had to request, and coordinate more than ten separate supporting elements, including two dedicated Blackhawk helicopters, logistical support from a U.S. Marine Corps unit, translators, interrogators, demolitions, and a force of twelve Afghan soldiers to spearhead the mission. Captain M was twenty-seven years old.

What made this operation different from the myriad of conventional operations soldiers and marines conduct every day in Afghanistan is that Captain M and his team conceived and carried out the entire mission on their own. This is typical of a SFODA that is expected to function independently, think creatively, and use the "by, with, and through" method of engagement common to Special Operations forces (SOF) missions. Such missions include

short, violent, and direct engagements using host nation troops to augment the SFODA or the SFODA will train and prepare host nation armies to defend their country against an insurgency. Captain M. had to rehearse the entire plan, de-conflict his operation with Marine and Spanish general officers, and be prepared to take responsibility for billions of dollars worth of assets not to mention the lives of the personnel working under him.

How did Captain M come to join this elite organization? How was he able to stand out among his peers to excel during the assessment and selection phase? A brief historical review reveals that elite groups are usually created because of a demonstrated need. The Green Berets, a Special Forces unit, were born out of necessity, tracing their roots to the demands of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in the early 1940s. Colonel "Wild Bill" Donovan, the founder of OSS, conceived of a force of individuals whose mission would be to go behind enemy lines and train indigenous forces to disrupt and ultimately defeat enemy capabilities, all undetected.¹ Performance of these tasks required exceptional individual intelligence, physical agility, special language and technical skills, and nerves of steel. Operators were initially selected based on their personal connections, leading to the joke that OSS stood for "Oh so social."

As is often the case in the military, mistakes in the field drive innovation. Operators were often unprepared and overwhelmed by the psychological demands of the job, which included maintaining a cover, working in isolation, and being under the constant threat of captivity.² It became necessary to develop better methods of selecting operators for these unconventional missions. Colonel Donovan eventually elicited the support of prominent psychologists to help form a nucleus of professionals to advise commanders about the best practices for the recruitment, assessment, and selection of men and women for the OSS. A thorough account of this program was recorded in *The Assessment of Men*.³ Aspects of it are still used today at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS).

Recruitment

How do the Special Forces find what they are looking for? The Army has a standardized process involving a permanent group of SF soldiers trained in marketing and "selling" SF to find and prepare quality soldiers for SF duty. The Special Operations Recruiting Battalion's (SORB) sole purpose is to educate, promote, and advise soldiers and their families about Special Operations (SO) jobs in the Army. There are several benefits to this dedicated asset. First, the recruiters know and have lived as SF operators. They are the best possible representatives of the organization. Second, the SORB recruiters are constantly

communicating with USAJFKSWCS, maintaining an awareness of changing requirements and the needs of the force. Third, marketing efforts, such as the Special Operations Parachute Demonstration Team, internet outreach campaigns, promotional videos and documentaries, and a chance to experience SF training through virtual reality technology can make being an SF operator the job of choice.

Once an applicant is interested, he is required to sit down with a recruiter to discuss basic requirements. If all basic requirements are met, soldiers are invited to attend the Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS), located at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. SFAS is a rigorous three-week test of physical and mental stamina. The program assesses and selects the best soldiers for the organization by measuring individual and group performance in a series of stressful events, such as land navigation, extended road marches, and team problem-solving tasks. If a candidate's performance is acceptable, he will be given the opportunity to enroll in the Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC) where he will learn a specialized skill and a language and complete a culmination training exercise called Robin Sage, where all his skills are tested. Once a graduate and awarded the coveted Green Beret, he is assigned to a Special Forces group and begins to perform his duties and responsibilities on an Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA). The entire process can take up to twenty-four months, so the recruiter must critically evaluate the commitment of the applicant.

Recruiting for elite organizations like SF can benefit from the support of former SF operators and their families. These include retirees and families of wounded and fallen comrades. Probably the most effective recruiting tool is the loyalty and constancy found among the SF community. It is unmatched in the conventional Army.

Assessment

What kind of person emerges when he or she is faced with great adversity? Teddy Roosevelt said, "The boy who is going to make a great man must not make up his mind merely to overcome a thousand obstacles, but to win in spite of a thousand defeats."⁴ SFAS gives each candidate an opportunity to demonstrate an ability to learn, work as part of a team, and maintain motivation through intense physical and psychological challenges. Each candidate is made equal during the assessment phase; rank, experience, and connections are all disregarded. Many of those who complete the assessment phase report that the program was the most difficult test of their lives. This is because the psychological stressors of unpredictability, physical discomfort, fatigue, and constant evaluation over several weeks are fairly effective at exposing the

fortitude of each candidate. It is in this environment that people like Captain M slowly rise to the top and stand out among their peers. Research has shown that Special Forces soldiers produce more of a protein-like molecule in the blood known as neuropeptide Y. This molecule helps calm the brain in stressful situations.⁵

Intelligence, character, and commitment are the three most important traits looked for during the assessment phase. Each candidate is evaluated using the Whole Man model, which is a Gestalt approach following the OSS model.⁶ This means that the assessment phase combines a myriad of tasks over time to reduce error and provide the selection committee with the best “snapshot” of the candidate. There are many opportunities for the candidate to fail and to succeed, and many opportunities for the candidate’s traits to be observed.

The tasks used to test candidates are designed to be stressful, but each task can be accomplished with some basic physical preparation and grit. For example, one well-known candidate exercise is the “Nasty Nick” obstacle course, aptly named after Colonel Nick Rowe. Rowe, best known for his book *Five Years to Freedom*, was an SF officer, POW, and strong advocate for physically and mentally preparing SF soldiers for captivity and to return home with honor.⁷ His story is a reminder to SF candidates to show courage and strength in the face of adversity. The course is grueling, with more than twenty obstacle features. The assessors are particularly interested in how the candidates react to “perceived failure.” Does a candidate bounce back and demonstrate a commitment to improve his performance? In addition, a candidate’s character may be tested for “cheating” during certain tasks. Will the candidate cheat again if given another opportunity? These assessments are designed to relate directly to real-world issues commonly confronted by SF soldiers in combat. These kinds of situations require an uncommon resilience or ability to bounce back and continue with the mission. SF operators need to be exceptionally stress tolerant, as their numbers are few, their missions more dangerous than those conventional forces may conduct, and their impact on the battlefield greater because of their special type of missions.

Candidates are constantly reminded that they are “always being assessed,” but how and when will usually be unknown to them. Events and tests are not always what they seem. This fact is even more pronounced during team assessment events, which are designed to evaluate how well candidates work together to accomplish a task: how well do they plan, communicate their plan, adjust to changing conditions, accomplish the task, and lead by example? Candidates are not necessarily judged on whether they finish a task; what matters is their approach and how they organize the effort. In

addition, candidates are judged on how well they follow the leader. In some cases, a leader is not identified. This practice was a common assessment technique used during British officer selection after World War I.⁸ Leaderless tasks help evaluators determine who in a group has natural leadership skills. Team assessment events also give evaluators insight into peer-to-peer relationships.

Peer evaluations are another tool used to gauge a candidate's performance within a group. Fellow candidates often are more candid and direct when it comes to the men they feel they can serve and live with on an ODA. Peer evaluations are criticized by some who claim that they are useful only for measuring the "popularity" of an individual. Research suggests, however, that peer evaluations are helpful in providing feedback to individuals about their performance. Such evaluations also give individuals specific, concrete information on what they can improve about their behavior.⁹ Peer evaluations reflect a unique dynamic on an SFODA: the ability to accept and give blunt and practical feedback.

The assessment phase ends with the requisite data collected for each candidate, and the process of reviewing each candidate begins. The assessors utilize a large database to collect and store data for every class that attends SFAS. The database includes more than 27,000 individual records. This way, data can be reviewed across, between, and within groups. Trends are monitored and changes to the program can be made based on the available data.

Selection

Selection decisions are made based on the needs of the SF community as well as the data collected on each candidate. SF leaders involved in selecting the newest member of the regiment are guided by what are called Special Operations Forces Truths.¹⁰ These are inscribed in the halls of the Special Warfare Center and School and are helpful reminders of the boundaries that limit decisions about hiring the right kind of person for the job.

Humans are more important than hardware. No matter what technology offers, the individual operator and his ability to master and use that technology are critical. This means that the ability to solve problems, learn and use a language in a foreign country, and build relationships with the indigenous population is more important than the newest weapons system, the fastest computer program, or the best long-range surveillance optics. With these basic mental skills, SF operators can and will excel in any kind of environment. The organization seeks individuals like Captain M who can perform when help does not arrive on time and can carry on in spite of failure.

Quality is better than quantity. This statement is under constant scrutiny as SF grows exponentially to meet the needs of the force. Soldiers that show character and integrity and an ability to resist temptation and to cope with perceived negative life events are highly regarded. At the same time, high energy, adventurousness, and risk-taking behaviors are equally regarded. Individuals who push limits are acceptable as long as they demonstrate an awareness of boundaries and self-regulation. Captain M learned during the assessment phase to seek and accept constant scrutiny by his subordinates, peers, and superiors. This habit forces them to always perform their best regardless of the circumstances and is a hallmark trait of an elite operator.

Special Operations forces cannot be mass produced. This statement reminds the leaders selecting soldiers for this elite organization that individual attention, coaching, mentoring, and learning takes time. Training cannot be rushed.

Competent Special Operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur. It is crucial that SF operators be ready to perform their job at any time. It is equally crucial that the SF "pipeline" continue to feed SFODAs with competent men. Fortunately, SF has a unique system that ensures that recruiters, assessors, and commanders are up to date on force needs. SF operators are routinely rotated back to the SORB and the Special Warfare Center and School as instructors or training company commanders.

The Special Operations Forces Truths guide selection decisions but there are also some checks and balances. The commander balances his judgment of candidate performance with the input of other senior SF leaders and support personnel on a selection board consisting of current and former commanders, command sergeants major, staff officers, psychologists, and civilians with expertise in the SF community. Although the psychologist or other board member may have the power to influence, the commander retains the authority to make the final decision regarding the selection of a candidate. Another practice is to identify candidates who may not be a good fit for the job of SF operator. As stated in one assessment text, "Results of wise decisions can range from the mere absence of problems to genuinely excellent outcomes promoting organizational purposes[.] . . . [C]onsequences of unwise decisions can range from inconvenience to disaster."¹¹

Selection errors exist even when rigorous recruitment and assessment tools are in place. Individuals who pass the selection gates are usually persons with exceptional qualities. Those who enter the Special Forces regiment without these qualities will typically be exposed and removed from further training.

THE NORWEGIAN ARMY SPECIAL FORCES

The special forces team in the MH-47D Chinook helicopter had prepared themselves well for the upcoming mission—tracking down members of the Taliban in a remote area of Afghanistan. The low-level flight toward their drop-off point was not an easy ride for the team and their leader. The loadmaster gave the first signal, indicating ten minutes to drop-off. The team leader turned on his GPS and reviewed the infiltration route one more time. The team then made the necessary last-minute checks.

As the loadmaster gave the signal for one minute to drop-off, the pilots decreased the speed of the helicopter. The team grabbed their backpacks by their handles, preparing to start dragging them toward the ramp of the helicopter. When the Chinook hovered over the drop-off point, the loadmaster got down on his knee, turned around, and commanded, “Go! Go! Go!” The team dragged their heavy backpacks toward the ramp and down it. They then threw themselves to the ground amid an inferno of dust and small rocks whipped up by the rotor blades. The Chinook lifted off and disappeared quickly in the darkness. The team got their weapons up and secured the 360 degrees around them. The silence they experienced was incredible. The team leader knew that they were on their own now, surrounded by enemies that wanted nothing more than to capture, torture, and kill them. The team leader focused on the job they had to do, and the team soon started moving. The hunt had begun.

The Norwegian army special forces, Forsvarets Spesialkommando / Hærens Jegerkommando (FSK/HJK), took part during Operation Enduring Freedom, Task Force K-Bar, and Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. The size of the unit is classified. Operators from FSK/HJK were decorated with the U.S. Navy Presidential Unit Citation for their contributions in Afghanistan from December 2001 to April 2002.¹² These operations, as well as the one described above, can place a heavy mental and physical burden on the personnel involved, especially those responsible for leading in such situations. Men and women who lead units in the world’s harshest environments are referred to as *in extremis* leaders.¹³

Recruitment

Imagine being the team leader in the chopper before being dropped on the ground in Afghanistan. Where would you find people like yourself to follow you on such a mission? What kind of person can cope with the type of training required? Training soldiers to handle the extra load and weight has been shown to be a decisive factor for success in operations in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Table 18.1 Physical Requirements for Norwegian Special Forces Candidates

Test	Minimum Required	Performance/Time Limits
Push-ups	45	Feet together, hands shoulder-width apart
Sit-ups	45	For 2 minutes
Pull-ups	8	Chin over the bar for each pull-up
Back raise	20	Repeated at 5-second intervals
Step test	140	Take 70 steps with each foot carrying a 25 kilogram backpack
Running	32	Complete 32 laps on a 15-by-7-meter short track dropping and touching chest to ground on one 15-meter side, and on the other 15-meter side dropping to the ground and rolling onto the back
Swimming		Swim 400 meters freestyle under 11 minutes; swim 25 meters underwater; dive to a depth of 4 meters
Speed march		Complete 30 kilometers, with a 25-kilogram backpack and weapon, in under 4 hours and 45 minutes
Orienteering		Navigate various lengths of terrain while carrying different loads in a backpack

FSK/HJK operators come from all classes of society.¹⁵ At the age of seventeen, they receive a letter from the Norwegian National Service Administration requiring them to appear at a nearby National Service Centre to be tested on their suitability for military service. Those who are determined to be qualified for military service are called to a military service center close to where they live. There they undergo a series of physical and mental tests. Applying for the special forces is popular. The minimum requirements for are listed in Table 18.1.

These requirements should be within reach of most potential candidates, but the drop-out rate can be as high as 90 percent once the selection period begins. Not many become an SF operator. After basic education as an SF operator, some members receive further education, up to a master's level.¹⁶

Many candidates applying to FSK/HJK have already served as airborne rangers for one year during their compulsory military service. Only 4 to 5 percent of new soldiers make it through the selection period to become rangers in the first place.¹⁷ The airborne rangers who serve the year usually are good candidates for SF education. Table 18.2 provides a brief overview of the traits and characteristics that FSK/HJK finds desirable in candidates.

Table 18.2 Desired Traits and Characteristics of Norwegian Special Forces Candidates

-
- ▶ Likes to push their own limits
 - ▶ Knows how to follow rules and regulations
 - ▶ Able to think and operate independently
 - ▶ Willing to obey an order and to commit to the team
 - ▶ Possesses above average control over emotions and a high tolerance for stress
 - ▶ Manages stress and ambiguity well
 - ▶ Has stamina
 - ▶ Able to cope well with people
 - ▶ Has a goal-driven behavior that allows for making detached and realistic judgments and exhibits coherent cognition
-

FSK/HJK searches for fast learners who can apply knowledge quickly. It also emphasizes general intelligence, and good psychomotor skills in candidates.¹⁸ One might easily imagine that while riding in a chopper before being dropped in Afghanistan is a demanding exercise. Being able to handle the unknown, the unknowable, and the subsequent stress over time is a crucial component of the physical and psychological makeup of an SF operator or team leader.

Assessment

After completing basic education, an operator only needs to make small adjustments to shift focus from winter warfare in Norway to operations in Afghanistan or other places in the world. However, common knowledge, an understanding of other people's culture, occupational proficiency, language skills, and the ability to improvise are some of the most important factors that contributed to the success of FSK/HJK operators in Afghanistan. These skills have to be developed over years.

Trust, integrity, and flexibility are also important for an SF operator. FSK/HJK operators are taught from the start to work in pairs. They are allowed to go to the commander and say that they cannot work with so and so, a type of peer evaluation similar to that in the U.S. Special Forces. Trust is also manifest in the high degree of openness among team members. After conducting missions, operators must attend a debriefing and talk to the unit's psychologist.¹⁹

Selection

Selection is an extensive process, based upon the experiences, practices, and knowledge of FSK/HJK operators, officers, and psychologists over the years. The first selection phase lasts three weeks and has many of the same elements

as in SFAS to test potential candidates' physical and mental stamina. This includes, for instance, long marches with heavy backpacks. Research on paratrooper aspirants has revealed these individuals to be gifted with above average intelligence.²⁰ An SF operator needs to be an individualist and a good team player at the same time. Believing that one will succeed can be decisive in accomplishing a mission.²¹ Therefore, belief in one's ability to solve whatever problems arise provides an advantage when applying to an SF unit.

The soldiers in Afghanistan have experienced a significant number of knee and back injuries, so testing future FSK/HJK candidates' capacity for marching while carrying heavy loads for long stretches would be a good idea.²² The history of FSK/HJK reveals that the best predictor of which candidates will make it through the selection process is the ability to manage physical loads over time. In the opening scenario here, all the team members, including the leader, had heavy packs that they knew they would have to carry for long distances over unforgiving terrain.

As in the British Special Air Service, most of FSK/HJK's selection process is done by experienced SF officers.²³ Many of them have gut feelings about who will make it through the experience. They most likely have been subjected to similar situations as the team and team leader in Afghanistan and know what traits and characteristics to look for in a potential candidate.

CONCLUSION

Members in military special forces and law enforcement emergency service units have a lot in common, including working in dangerous and unknowable situations, coping with uncertainty, and making quick decisions. Members of such units are normally of above average intelligent and have the willpower to go the extra mile. Establishing a formal recruitment system is critical, otherwise these units might confront a shortage of candidates applying to them. Using experienced officers during selection or mentors during the assessment periods is recommended.

Putting candidates through one or several well-organized interviews will reveal important information about a potential candidate. Identifying a candidate's motivation for wanting to join a unit is crucial. A strong inner drive is necessary, but must be combined with the right attitude. Successful candidates will show that they have the ability to learn fast and to put acquired knowledge into action when needed.

Several tests should be conducted to determine whether a candidate can withstand the physical and mental stresses of the job. The traits to look for are

intelligence, commitment, and good character along with a high tolerance for stress. Testing how candidates function under physical stress also reveals personality traits, willpower, and ability to work with others. An ability to bounce back from bad or difficult situations and the level of comfort with ambiguity must be determined. Honest feedback through peer evaluation, and candidates' response to it, is critical. They must function well on an individual and team level, displaying cooperation, trust, and integrity. It takes time to find individuals through the recruitment, assessment, and selection process with the physical and mental stamina needed to perform in the type of units under discussion.

KEY TAKE-AWAY POINTS

1. Elite organizations use dedicated assets to recruit, assess, and select members. These duties are separate from training.
2. Assessment for elite organizations is multidimensional and longitudinal. No one task or test is the sole basis for selection or rejection.
3. Operators in elite organizations accept, seek, and provide constant performance feedback.
4. Psychologists in elite organizations serve primarily as consultants in the assessment and selection processes. Commanders have sole decision-making authority.

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