

## **Ways of improving the selection procedure for Special Forces Personnel**

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In the future, the number of applicants for KSK, the German Army Special Forces Command, will decline rather than increase, the reason being the low birth rate of the years in which the potential candidates were born. In view of this situation the Psychological Service of KSK has repeatedly tried over the past few years to improve the selection procedure. The aim in doing so was to raise the percentage of successful candidates without, however, lowering the demands. In my paper I am going to describe this process to you in detail.

KSK was created in 1995 as a consequence of the new situation that German armed forces were increasingly employed in military missions abroad. Right at the start, the Bundeswehr Psychological Service was requested to develop a selection procedure for commando soldiers. Our task was to develop an assessment center procedure that would take into consideration the experience of allied forces and German special police units. General intelligence, special skills and social as well as personal competence were qualities we had to cover in this selection process. During the first two years the psychological assessment was embedded in a two-week military selection course and lasted for three days.

The second step, implemented in autumn 1998, was the introduction of a three-week selection course, as the drop-out rate due to inability to meet the physical demands had turned out to be too high. The psychological assessment took place during the first week. It included role plays, a group discussion, a task of organisational type and an individual interview. In addition, computer-assisted methods were used to gather a number of other intellectual performance data. Also part of this first week was the test of the candidates' physical performance. They had to meet the following

requirements: 5 chin-ups, physical fitness test, negotiating the obstacle course in less than one minute forty, 500 meters of swimming in less than 15 minutes and 7000 meters of cross-country running with a 20 kilogram field pack in less than 52 minutes.

In the second week the applicants had to go through a training in key subjects which included tasks that were of relevance for the third week like, for example, orientation in the terrain, rappelling and survival in the field. The third week, then, posed maximum requirements on the physical performance of the candidates, as they had to undergo an extremely demanding one-week military selection course. The soldiers were faced with the following training situations during this week: orientation in the terrain, shortage of food, shortage of sleep, hurried foot marches, transportation of wounded soldiers, survival in the field, overcoming of obstacles, isolation and questioning. Having accomplished this physically straining program, the soldiers in addition had to undergo a number of psychological testing procedures such as memory and personality tests. For the first time the applicants were also given some advice on how to train for the selection procedure, though that advice was of rather general kind, as for example: 'you should train hard and intensively'. All these modifications of the selection procedure, however, still did not bring the desired results, as still up to 90% of the applicants were not able to undergo the procedure successfully.

In 1999 representatives of the Psychological Service and the so-called Military Recruitment Team came together in order to discuss possible ways of raising the percentage of successful applications. As a result, a counselling programme for applicants was introduced. The counselling started as soon as an application from a soldier had been received and continued up to the actual aptitude test, the aim being to have the applicants guided by Military Recruitment Team personnel through the phase leading up to the aptitude phase. After an application had been received, the individual was invited to an interview in order to clarify open questions such as missing papers in support of the application or the question if the individual was actually ready to come to the aptitude

test at the scheduled date. The next step was a letter to the disciplinary superior of the person in question, asking for his support of the application. Between four and six weeks in advance of the aptitude test the applicant received a letter in which he was reminded of the date of the selection procedure. The most significant new thing about the procedure before the aptitude test was that the Military Recruitment Team from now on provided detailed training recommendations to the applicants in written form. On the basis of these recommendations, the soldiers were able to develop their individual training schedules, for example running training programs or circuits. The main objective of this training schedule was that the individual applicant would be able to strengthen his muscular apparatus and improve his endurance. In addition, recommendations were given which were of general character yet might nonetheless be quite important for soldiers with relatively little infantryman's background. This included, for example, rules on a soldier's care of his feet or the rule never to use unworn boots for prolonged foot marches. Also the applicants were advised to wear a rucksack during their preparatory training already, because it is useful to get accustomed at an early time to walking and running with a heavy backpack. These recommendations concluded by reminding the candidates - obvious though it may seem - of the fact that the venue of the aptitude test would be high mountain terrain in the Black Forest, not the Northern German Lowlands. This approach helped to improve the rate of successful candidates steadily.

At the same time a "drop-out seminar" was created. This procedure, developed jointly by the Psychological Service and the Military Recruitment Team, is headed by the Chief of the Military Recruitment Team, since he is not involved in the selection decision process. The seminar is organised for all applicants who give up before the end of the aptitude test, either because health problems force them to or as a decision of their own free will. The aim is to give these soldiers the possibility to reduce their frustration by participating in a feedback discussion, because we don't want unsuccessful candidates to return to their units as multipliers of negative attitudes. All soldiers

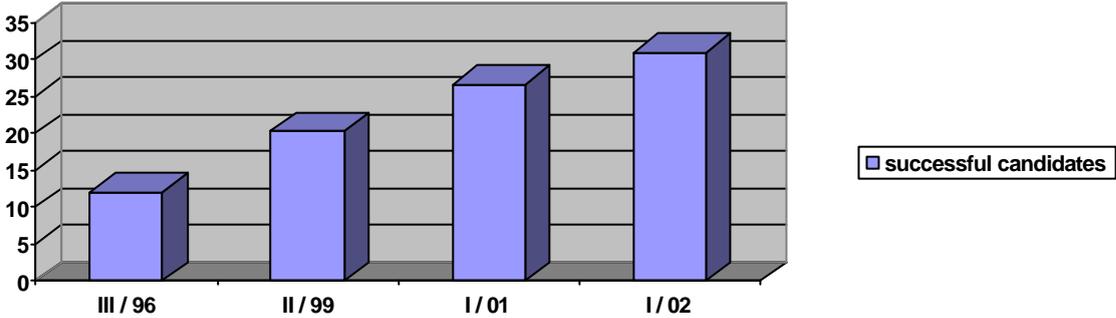
receive a letter addressed to their superiors at home which certifies that they have shown an outstanding performance that clearly exceeds the level required for soldiers of normal units.

The improvement concept has meanwhile resulted in a procedure which is going to be implemented for the first time in autumn 2002 and which is carried out in the form I am now going to describe. It is not only the sequence of elements but also the extent of counselling that has changed. As before, the first week starts with the psychological assessment in which the test of physical fitness is embedded. The second week serves to make the soldiers more familiar with KSK and inform them on site about KSK's mission and capabilities. This is achieved, as under the pattern presented before, by means of a training in key subjects which is oriented to the military selection course. In addition the candidates are shown the weapons and equipment of KSK. At the end of these two weeks, each applicant now receives a training schedule which is individually tailored to his person and a first feedback from the psychologist. On the basis of this information he then has about 10 weeks time to prepare intensively for the final military and psychological assessment and overcome his weaknesses that have been identified and pointed out to him. Thus a candidate is now informed about his current performance level much earlier than under the pattern used before and able to take measures on his own initiative to improve his performance where necessary. If things turn out negatively, he comes to the conclusion that he was wrong and the job of a commando soldier is not the right thing for him; if things turn out in the most positive way, he intensifies his training and performs successfully during the final assessment.

The aim of this intensive and individual counselling is to get only candidates who have the necessary will to pass the aptitude test successfully. Furthermore, KSK expects that it can thus reduce the number of soldiers who clearly don't meet the physical prerequisites for performing successfully in the selection process but who nevertheless decide to have a try. The participation in the aptitude test of soldiers who are on an inadequate performance level puts an additional burden on

the well-performing applicants, because the latter tend to show team spirit and try to help their weaker fellow-soldiers which means that they go to the limit of their capabilities too early. The result is that they – the good candidates – also run the risk of failing in the aptitude test because they have used up their potential too soon.

By this modification of the selection procedure we are hoping to receive a higher number of suitable applicants who take part in the military selection course and, more importantly, who accomplish it successfully. The rising percentage of successful candidates we have experienced in the past few years is making us optimistic. The following figure shows some selection rates and the percentages of successful candidates in the years 1996, 1999, 2001, 2002.



Of course there are a number of external motivation factors, such as higher extra pay, good promotion prospects and improved possible career paths after duty as a commando soldiers, but these factors are outside the area of influence of the Psychological Service, that's why I have not addressed them in my paper.