

WAR OFFICE SELECTION BOARDS AND THE ROLE OF THE PSYCHIATRIST IN THEM.

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INTRODUCTION.

In 1941 Army Psychiatrists were asked to undertake experiments in Officer Selection. At that time the Army required a large number of officers quickly and, since very few of the possible candidates had had experience of battle conditions, the test of battle was not available. Further, it was beginning to be felt that the existing method of selection by interview had serious limitations and in particular did not appear satisfactory to the rank and file of the Army. Evidence of the inadequate selection was found in the high rejection rates at O.C.T.U.s which resulted in a serious wastage in training and this large proportion of failures naturally had an adverse effect on the morale of training units.

Psychiatrists were called in because in the course of their work they had accumulated a considerable amount of knowledge of the Army and its personnel problems. They had had to deal with breakdowns in officers and their training and experience enabled them to understand the causal factors which were operating. It seemed likely, therefore, that psychiatric examination of candidates for commissions would reveal a good proportion of those who would be likely to fail in their training or service for one reason or another. In addition, Psychiatrists were concerned in their work with the potentialities and modes of adjustment of individuals. This gave them an advantage in facing the problems of predicting how an individual would perform when placed in a different field of work or in a different level of responsibility in the same field.

The first experiment to verify these assumptions was carried out on groups of officers attending a Company Commanders' School. The results showed that Psychiatrists, on the basis of interview and intelligence tests, made judgments on the quality of officers in close agreement with the opinions reached by the staff of the School at the end of the five weeks' course. The experience gained in this experiment made it clear that the best selection procedure would be obtained by forming a Board which combined experienced regimental officers with technical experts, i.e. Psychiatrists and Psychologists. An experimental Board was set up on these lines and within a few months an acceptable procedure had been evolved. W.O.S.B.s which followed the pattern of the experimental Board were then set up throughout the country.

CONSTITUTION OF A W.O.S.B.

Each board consists of the following members: President (Colonel), Deputy President (Lieutenant-Colonel), Senior Military Testing Officer (Major), and three Military Testing Officers (Captains) who form the military side; Specialist Psychiatrist (Major, R.A.M.C.) and Psychologist (Captain or Lieutenant assisted by Serjeant Testers) who form the technical department.

OUTLINE OF PROCEDURE.

The candidates arrive at the W.O.S.B.s in groups of 30 to 50 twice a week and each group remains for three days at the Board. The whole atmosphere is informal so that candidates will feel at ease. They live in a hostel and are brought into close contact with the members of the Board, especially with the Military Testing Officers (M.T.O.s) who Mess with them. On the first day each candidate completes two questionnaires about himself, does a battery of

three general intelligence tests and three tests designed to give information about his personality. (The nature of these tests is discussed more fully in a later section.)

The candidates are then divided into groups of 8 to 10, each group being in the charge of an M.T.O. who is responsible for briefing the candidates in the various tests and for forming a judgment on each of them on the basis of their performance throughout the course of the Board. The tests administered by the M.T.O. are carried out on the second and third day and are designed to find out whether the candidate's basic personality does or does not fit him for the main roles which an officer has to play. The essence of the junior officer's job under war conditions is that he has to cope both with persons and with "things" at the same time and frequently under stress. The M.T.O. has to find out whether the candidate's basic personality is such that he shows promise of being able to deal effectively with concrete situations. To do this the candidate must have good adaptability to persons, i.e. good "interpersonal relations," and also good adaptability to things, i.e. ability to appreciate a concrete situation and resourcefulness in dealing with a constantly varying material environment. The "military" tests are designed to elucidate these problems. There are three main types of test: (i) Leaderless Groups; (ii) Practical Individual Situations; (iii) Command Situations.

No special military knowledge is required for any of them. In (i) the group is left to its own devices in coping with situations which are set by the M.T.O. or by the candidates themselves. These tests enable the observers to gain a picture of the candidate's spontaneous behaviour in a group setting. They form a continuous series which is usually witnessed by a team of three observers, half the candidates being observed by the President, Psychiatrist and the M.T.O. of the particular group and the other half by the Deputy President, Psychologist and the appropriate M.T.O. In (ii) the candidate's practical abilities are tested by making him do some tests using only his own physical resources, e.g. obstacle courses. Alternatively he may have to look about for tools and equipment in order to improvise a solution to some practical problem. Valuable information is obtained by discussing with the candidate the reasons why he performed in a particular way. In (iii) the M.T.O. puts the candidate specifically in charge of his group while carrying out some assigned task. Throughout the M.T.O. makes notes of certain objective facts about each candidate's performance and also records his subjective impressions, i.e. his interpretations of his performance.

During the second and third days interviews are also carried out, half the candidates being interviewed by the President and half by the Deputy President. In addition a certain number are selected, as explained later, for interview by the Psychiatrist. At the end of the testing period the final Board Conference is held with all members of the Board present. Each candidate is discussed and a decision reached on whether he should pass or fail, and, if he passes, for which arm he is likely to be most suitable.

THE ROLE OF THE PSYCHIATRIST.

The role of the Psychiatrist in the W.O.S.B.s is a twofold one. As the senior officer of the technical department he advises the Board on the assets and liabilities of candidates. There are two groups of candidates in whom this advice is particularly valuable, those who might be overlooked because of some superficial handicap, e.g. undue reserve, which observes the fact that basically they are sound, well integrated and quite capable of succeeding as officers, and those who might be passed on a superficial good impression although, on account of certain personality features or low intelligence, they are unlikely to make useful officers. His second main function is to give expert advice on the psychological aspects of the military tests and it may be noted that many of the military tests now used are based on suggestions made by Psychiatrists.

PSYCHIATRIC ASSESSMENT.

There are three possible sources of information which contribute to the psychiatric assessment of any candidate. These are: (1) Written test data; (2) observation of candidates in military tests; (3) psychiatric interview.

(1) *Written Test Data.*—This can be divided into three types :—

(a) *Questionnaires* : Each candidate completes a questionnaire concerned with the facts of his military training, occupation, education and social activities. This is also available to the President for his interviews. A second questionnaire giving facts about his medical and family history is marked confidential and is completed for the use of the Technical Department only.

(b) *Intelligence Tests* : These are three in number and consist of a special version of the "Matrix" test devised for officer candidates, a verbal intelligence test and a reasoning test. Standards of performance have been established on these tests and according to the scores on them each candidate is given an Officer Intelligence Rating (O.I.R.) ranging from 0 to 10. A rating of 1 corresponds to an intelligence about the level of the ordinary private soldier while a rating of 7 is equivalent to that of the average officer.

(c) "*Personality*" Tests : There is no test which gives a complete assessment of personality but certain written tests can give some indication of the dominant trends which are present. The tests used for the purpose are :—

- (i) *Self Description.*—Here the candidate has to write in fifteen minutes a description of himself firstly as a good friend and secondly as a strong critic would do it.
- (ii) *Word Association Test.*—The candidate is shown a series of words at brief intervals. He has to write down a statement describing what each word calls up to his mind.
- (iii) *Thematic Apperception Test.*—A series of pictures is projected on to a screen. Each depicts human figures with ambiguous expressions and the candidate has to write a short story about each for which the picture could act as an illustration. The themes which he chooses are normally related to his own dominant attitudes and experience.

From the results of these written tests the Psychological staff construct what is termed a "Personality Pointer," i.e. a short statement of what appear to be the main features in the candidate's personality. As the name implies these pointers are merely indications of certain trends in the personality and are in no sense a final estimate of it. They serve a useful purpose in separating the candidates according to the need for further investigation by psychiatric interview. In addition they may help to shorten the interview by indicating the particular aspects of personality upon which attention has to be concentrated.

(2) *Observation of Candidates in Military Tests.*—The Psychiatrist obtains valuable information about the candidates by acting as an observer at some of the military tests, particularly the leaderless group series. Interchange of views among the observers in each team enables each one to build up a clearer and more accurate picture of the candidate's performance than would have been possible with a single observer. It also enables discrepancies in judgment to be brought to light, helps to determine the particular aspects of each candidate which require special attention and helps to select those cases which require psychiatric interview.

(3) *Psychiatric Interview.*—Originally all candidates were interviewed by the Psychiatrist but, owing to pressure of work, it was necessary to alter this so that now he interviews those in whom his opinion is likely to be of most assistance to the Board. This group is made up of the candidates who fall into the "doubtful" group on the pointers and those who are selected by the observer teams at the leaderless group series. In addition certain candidates may be referred by the President on the basis of what he has found in his interview. It may be said, therefore, that the Psychiatrist interviews all candidates except those who are regarded unanimously by the members of the Board as clear-cut "passes" or clear-cut "failures."

The object of the interview is to enable the Psychiatrist to form an assessment of the candidate's personality. The reason why the Psychiatrist is in a position to do this is that he has been trained to observe and assess human beings objectively. He is, of course, subject to prejudice but his training should have made him aware of his prejudices and enabled him to discount them. He is able, therefore, to concentrate on the candidate's basic qualities

and is not likely to be put off by an unfortunate manner or an awkward exterior. Secondly, through his training and experience he has gained a knowledge of certain types of character which he has learned to recognize and whose prognosis he knows, e.g. the "anxious and worrying," the "schizoid," the "hypomanic," the "obsessive self driver," etc. Within each type the degree to which the particular features identifying the type are present varies widely and the Psychiatrist is the only person in a position to assess the significance of these features in any individual case in terms of the likelihood of the individual standing up to stress or the danger of neurotic symptoms developing. In other words, his clinical experience enables him to recognize "danger signals" which would escape the untrained observer. Finally, interviewing has formed an important part of his professional career and the training which he has had in the art of interviewing enables him to obtain more information about a man's basic character than is possible for the ordinary interviewer.

In conducting his interview the Psychiatrist must gain the confidence of the candidate as quickly as possible so that the latter may express himself frankly. He is helped in this by his position as a medical officer which establishes him in the candidate's mind as an impartial but sympathetically disposed person. Once the proper relationship has been established, the interview proceeds spontaneously and most candidates welcome the opportunity of talking about themselves and their problems.

By the end of his interview the Psychiatrist has amassed a considerable amount of information about the candidate—what his background is, how he has developed and how he has dealt with the difficulties in life which he has encountered so far. With this information plus the "pointer" material he is now in a position to form a judgment on the structure of the candidate's basic personality and to offer a reasonable prediction on the likelihood of the candidate's success as an officer, i.e. how far he is likely to carry out effectively the officer role. He forms his opinion after balancing the strengths and weaknesses which he has detected and presents this opinion to the Board in the form of a report explaining why the candidate should be accepted or rejected. This report is considered by the President at the final Board Conference along with the M.T.O.'s report and, in the light of these and of his own findings about the candidate, the President decides whether the candidate should pass and if so with what grade, whether he should fail, or whether he should be put back for further training to appear again before a Board after a suitable interval. In the case of candidates whom he has not interviewed, the Psychiatrist may present a report based on interpretation of the "pointer" material and upon what has been observed in some of the military tests. This report cannot of course be so complete as the kind he makes after interview but since there is, as a rule, little doubt about the candidates who are not interviewed, this is not a serious drawback.

DEVELOPMENTS.

What has been said so far applies to the selection of candidates for commissions. But W.O.S.B.s have gradually undertaken other kinds of work for which appropriate procedures had to be developed. In the developing and operating of these procedures, Psychiatrists have played an important part. Examples which may be given include the assessment of officers upon whom adverse reports have been made, the selection of schoolboys for short University courses with a view to their receiving basic technical education prior to their being trained for commissions in certain specified arms, and the interviewing of officers who have been treated in psychiatric hospitals to ensure that they are given the type of employment in the Army for which they are best suited. These are only a few examples but they illustrate the range of technical developments which have taken place. All these developments have this in common—that they aim at ensuring that each man should as far as possible be given a job in keeping with his personality and ability. The experience of Psychiatrists makes them only too familiar with the difficulties and dangers arising from neglect of this principle and it is this same experience which makes the work of Psychiatrists in the selection field so valuable.