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Abstract

The South African Operational Forces or “recces” as they are known, have a reputation for excellence. Before the 1994 democracy in South Africa and to this day, this group of elite soldiers have been associated with high standards that make them “urban legends” in the eyes of young men, dreaming of an adventurous career in which they can prove their manliness. The process of becoming a South African Operational Forces soldier is marked with challenges and adversity that most individuals will not be able to overcome. Only a very small percentage of those that take the decision to attempt Operational Forces Selection, qualify. It is of concern that Operational Forces recruit attrition within the first 12 weeks of training remains consistently above 50%. Un-effective selection methods that lead to the training of recruits that voluntarily withdraw have a significant impact on already limited military budgets and resources in South Africa, but apart from that, little is known about the personal experiences of those who take the decision to withdraw.

Objective

The aim of this research was to explore the personal experiences of operational forces recruits that take the decision to voluntarily withdraw from pre-selection training and of those that fail.

Methods

This study draws on qualitative and quantitative data from the first phase of a larger mixed method study. The focus of this paper is the findings directly related to the responses of recruits in exit interviews and their instructors’ training reports.

Results

What the data provided was an opportunity to explore candidates’ experiences during the first phases of the gruelling Operational Forces pre-selection training cycle. This exploration provides an opportunity to identify the personal and organisation factors that the recruits experience throughout their transition from civilian life to service in the South African Operational Forces. It is the combined effect of the physical and mental training demands, combined with the recruits’ inability to maintain mental tenacity in the midst of training approaches designed to test candidates to the limit as candidates struggle to overcome physical injuries and feelings of despair, which appears to be the main reason for failure among recruits.

Conclusion

There are clearly defined areas where either further research or changes to current practice may provide a better understanding of, and ultimately reduce, the current attrition rates experienced by the South African Operational Forces.

Keywords: Recruitment, Operational Forces, Voluntary withdrawal; Military, training attrition,

1. Introduction

Often referred to as “highly trained professionals in a class of their own (Matthysen, Kalkwarf, & Huxtable, 2010, p5), the South African Special Forces Operator has over more than four decades, marked by changes on various levels within South African society, remained relevant and respected as the ultimate warriors in the minds of many South African individuals (Ellis, 1998), elite soldiers, perceived as quintessential warriors with character strengths of resilience, courage, bravery, integrity and honesty (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In a troubled country that relies on brave defenders, these soldiers are often associated with personal attributes like courage (Rachmann, 1991, 1995; Matthews, 2014); resilience (Rachman, 1991,; Iacoviello and Charney, 2014) military ethos (Snider, 2012) and symbols of versatility and effectiveness (Steyn, D., 2015).

The image of contributing to one’s country and participating in a prestigious military organisation can serve to enhance the self-concept of young people and that admiration of the military serves as motivation for prospective trainees to enlist in order to become part of a symbol of what is great and honourable. (Moskos 1977; Moskos and Wood 1988; Izraeli, 1997; Seginer, 1999; Eighmey, 2006; Woodruff, Kelly, and Segal, 2006; Griffith, 2008). Yet the expectations candidates may have when they join a prestigious military grouping like the Operational Forces, may cause them to withdraw when reality does not match their perceptions of “adventure”, “being a hero” and “proving their manliness”

The South African Operational Forces Selection course sets very high standards. Applicants for Operational Forces must have completed a one-year military service (first year MSD), be proficient in reading, writing and speaking English, must successfully complete the Operational Forces Entry Tests and candidates must be operationally deployable. Upon completion of the notoriously difficult 57-week cycle; successful recruits will receive the coveted

Operational Forces Operators Badge and a Certificate in Operational Forces Operations.

(<http://www.recce.co.za/frontpage/recruitment>). The course is run by the Operational Forces Training units in Northern and Western parts of South Africa as well as at the Operational Forces School in Pretoria. The selection course is designed to reliably predict successful completion of the Operational Forces Training course that will lead successful candidates to become qualified specialist soldiers within this domain. The focus during the selection phase is on identifying trainable candidates that meet the requirements associated with Operational Forces selection.

The assessment process is focused on individual and team performance and behaviours to ensure that candidates demonstrate the required levels of fitness and other attributes required to be a successful Operational Forces soldier. Specialised Military training in the South African context places significant emphasis on the quality of the soldiers that it produces. Described as being the best trained soldiers in the South African National Defence Force (Patta, 2013)

Assessments are purposefully gruelling (de Beer & van Heerden, 2014) and require candidates that are physically and emotionally stable. Candidates that are unable to overcome the various obstacles associated with military training, often take the decision to withdraw. (Krueger, 2001). Attrition rates with the specialised military training environment is high and the main reasons given for dropping out are health/ injury related (Dimitriou, Lockey, & Castell, (2016).

Beal (2010, p.14) found that Physical fitness forms the primary basis upon which training success in the specialised military rests. There is however evidence that suggest that apart from physical fitness, positive psychology constructs like hardiness has a positive impact within the training environment. Lovering et.al (2015) found evidence recruits who reported higher scores on a measure of positive hardiness also reported higher scores on training expectations, positive ways of coping, physical and mental health, fitness scores.

Exit interviews are conducted in many organisations to elicit reasons for employee turnover (Leahey, 1991). The exit interview can be defined as "a widely used tool for gathering information from separating employees" (Giacalone, 2003 p. 398) to enable improved training (Erickson 1996; Leahey, 1991; Neidermeyer, 1987); and to 'trend' reasons for turnover (Erickson 1996).

Attrition rates during the 57-week Operational Forces Basic Training Cycle (Operational Forces Individual Phase 1 & Operational Forces Selection) have historically ranged between 75 % and 87%. Significant investments are made in terms of resources that include time and money to recruit and further invest in candidates. Training of the highest standards are conducted to ensure the quality of the soldiers produced after the training cycle leading up to the qualification phases of this specialised military training. (<http://www.recce.co.za/frontpage/recruitment>). Training of the highest standards is conducted to ensure the quality of the soldiers produced. During the recruitment phase: Applicants are pre-screened on academic results, medical suitability and PT tests. Approximately 41% of candidates invited to attend the pre-selection preparation phase are lost. The Pre-selection Preparation phase entails medical and physical as well as psychological (personality and cognitive) measurements, here a further 29% of candidates either voluntarily withdraw or are withdrawn by instructors and trainers. The Pre-selection Phase entails a 10-week structured process of physical fitness and mental preparation. During this time the numbers usually decline with a further 17% as a result of voluntary self-withdrawals and medical withdrawals leading to an average of 13% of candidates that complete the selection stage to become Operational Forces Operators. (<http://www.recce.co.za/frontpage/recruitment>)

This research aimed to understand reasons why recruits fail, or choose to leave, so that informed approaches can be taken to address these consistent high rates of attrition.

Within the military organisation, there is a very unique culture that differs from that of society in general. (Deacon, 1995; Albert, Whetten, Cummings, Staw, 1985).

“Organizational Culture is the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1984 p 3).

If a recruit however finds themselves unable to adapt and integrate the military way of doing”, they are unable to develop a personal identity in which they view themselves as part of the organisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) while they are being stripped of their personal identities (uniformed dress-code, haircut, control over time and space) through military training tactics aimed at breaking recruits down to enable them to build them back up.

If the recruit is unable to keep up with the physical demands of the training, the risk for injuries become significant and associated with the physical injuries (Knapik, Sharp, Darakjy Jones, Hauret, Jones, 2006), demotivation to continue occurs. Research has shown that willingness to participate in sports and exercises is correlated with task completion, ego, and motivation. (Elsass & Wingler, 2003) and yet motivation to serve in the military is not measured within the South African Operational Forces.

However, questions remain as to why recruits choose to voluntarily withdraw from the pre-selection training phase after already enduring and overcoming gruelling obstacles and challenges up to that point. It is important to explore the experiences of these recruits from an individual and organisational level of analysis to identify available factors that may lead to a decrease in voluntary withdrawals.

2. Aim

The aim of this research was to explore the personal experiences of operational forces recruits that take the decision to voluntarily withdraw from pre-selection training and of those that fail.

3. Methods

A concurrent mixed method research approach was followed, which combines qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell, 2003, Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). We simultaneously acquired qualitative and quantitative data through written responses to open-ended survey questions. Our research method was in line with the definition of Johnson et al. (2007: 123), “mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative researches (e.g., the use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration’ to generate insights, explanations and potential solutions to training attrition.

Mixed method methodology was selected to ensure that the richness of the qualitative data could be validated by quantitative findings (Sandelowski, M., 2003). Quantitative responses were categorized into individual / organisational categories to identify factors that might have contributed to the candidate’s decision to voluntarily withdraw.

What? : To examine and take note of factors that contribute to the voluntarily withdrawal of candidates during the Operational Forces Basic Training Cycle

Who? The population of the study consisted of Operational Forces candidates that voluntarily withdrew from the Basic Training Cycle.

When? 2013: Operational Forces Basic Training Cycle

Where? Northern and Western South Africa

How? Mixed method

Sample size: N=67

Sample description: Operational Forces Candidates (all males) with ages ranging from 23
– 26

Validation: Results were validated through data triangulation by combining the results of
open-ended survey questions with closed-ended survey questions.

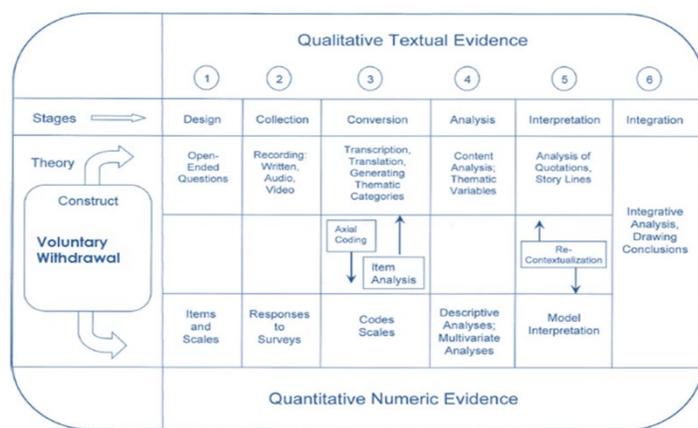
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Rating scales, measuring candidate responses to their reasons for voluntary withdrawal
from the pre-selection training (quantitative data) were combined with the candidates’ responses
to open-ended questions (Qualitative data). (Krosnick, J. A., & Tahk, A. M, 2008).

Qualitative Themes were identified from open-ended question responses as they related to
voluntary withdrawals and quantitative

Our research approach is presented in Figure 1 demonstrating the integrative process we
followed. We started by conceptualizing information as research evidence, which took the form
of verbal text narrative evidence (qualitative) and numeric data evidence (quantitative). Based on
theory, the core construct (voluntary withdrawal) was featured as a central concept examined
under each of six stages within a parallel process. This facilitated data conversions, (in this case
axial coding) to encode thematic categories into numeric thematic variables. We then compared

Running head: Exploring Factors contributing to voluntarily withdrawal by Candidates during South African Operational Forces Selection



Source: Castell, 2007

and contrasted textual and numeric forms of evidence in an integrative manner. The aim was to examine evidence in both forms concurrently to obtain more definitive conclusions and for a more complete understanding of the factors that lead to early phase

voluntary withdrawal and their effects.

The study was conducted at the South African Operational Forces School in Gauteng and the Western Cape, South Africa. It was undertaken over a period of six months with recruits that voluntarily withdrew from the pre-selection phase of training. When a recruit left training as a result of voluntary withdrawal, they were invited to complete the exit interview survey.

The process began with an introduction to the study to the recruits that voluntarily withdrew in the presence of training staff. All recruits that voluntarily withdrew were provided with the purpose and nature of the study on the cover page and a request for their participation.

Data Collection

Recruits who agreed to participate completed the exit interview survey within 48 hours of making the decision to voluntarily withdraw from the pre-selection cycle.

Recruits who discontinued within the first 12 weeks of training completed the exit survey. 27 Recruits completed the survey over a 6 month period as they left training.

A semi-structured exit interview survey template was developed from discussions with training staff and previous studies into training attrition within the South African Military

environment. Closed-ended questions allowed for insight into the organisational level experiences by the candidates while Open-ended Questions were designed to explore the individual's experiences and their reasons for voluntary withdrawal. The aim being that the recruit was invited to expand on their reasons for voluntary withdrawal in their own words and within their own experiences of the training. When developing the exit interview survey template operational forces training staff provided descriptions of recruits who failed to complete training. Part of the study was to compare the complete exit survey data with the training reports from trainers in order to better understand the reasons for failure.

Analysis

The responses of the candidates to open-ended questions on the paper-and-pencil questionnaire were analysed by means content analysis, using Atlas.ti software- with the aim of obtaining common themes and patterns of responses within the data. Content analysis of open-ended questions was done by attributing texts to content categories (e.g., Krippendorff, 1980; Jones et al., 2010). The process of building content categories was first based on general open-ended questions pertaining to the candidates' responses to questions. Responses by the candidates were then used as potential coding themes and was further explored and refined. We found that the survey responses overlapped in terms of the various references made by candidates to physical fitness, mental fitness and trainer involvement and decided to present our results in terms of shared themes extracted from the texts of all responses. In terms of the responses to the open ended survey questions, the authors took care to not only focus on the concepts that were presented through the most frequently used codes but also identified additional ideas that were presented within the text as comments, as the open-ended survey question offers respondents the

opportunity to add their thoughts in terms of wider issues which revealed rich and worthwhile data that enabled a better understanding of the Operational Forces selection context.

The study gained full ethical and scientific approval from South African Military Psychology Institute

4. Results

Quantitative and Qualitative Results pertaining to the reasons for voluntary withdrawals were categorised according to three Main themes and their subthemes presented as the 9 main factors influencing the decisions for voluntary withdrawal.

Theme 1: Physical Injuries

The majority of candidates, (almost 2/3) leave the organisation because of physical injuries.

“I am leaving because I was unable to walk. My feet injury is too much for me to take.”; “It’s because of medical problems. I got an injury on my back and also the right hand can’t hold with.”; “After I got the injury I couldn’t perform some of the exercise which made the training a bit hazy, besides injuries everything was normal for me.”

Theme 2: Preparation

Candidates indicated that prospective candidate had to be physically and mentally prepared before they arrive.

“Not well prepared in my mind and unnecessary injuries , the physical part the instructors did help.”; “To prepare both mentally and physically by training months prior to the commencement of the course...”; “I am not prepared...my mind was not prepared...Personal unfitness”.

Theme 3: Trainer influence

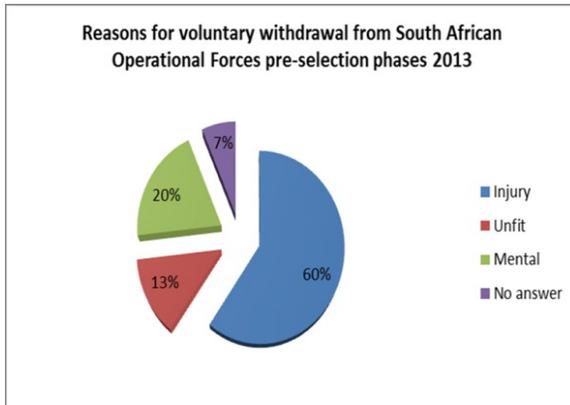
Trainers have a direct influence on the candidates’ frame of mind – negative reinforcement may be effective in identifying the right candidates, but care should be taken not to lose good candidates through excessive negative reinforcement.

“Do not punish them unnecessary. “; “By motivating them and stop telling them they won’t make it or pass the training.”; “If the trainer will stop demoralizing them with words

Avoid telling learners negative comments about their fitness level.” Encouraging them and giving them support also by advising them.”

Factors identified

1. The reasons for voluntary withdrawal



The results from the data (presented in Figure 2) revealed that 60% of candidates indicated that they left because of physical challenges, 20% indicated that Psychological factors played a role in them exiting from the organisation, 13% of candidates left the organisation because they were unfit and 7% did not provide an answer. Qualitative responses to this question included the following Factors: **Factor 1: Preparation:**

Figure 2 *“Did not train hard and have no patience”..... Factor 2: Physical Fitness: “I was injured and not fit”...; Factor 3: Mental Fitness: “The body can be trained but not the mind for this course”.....;*

2. What could the organisation have done to encourage you to stay?

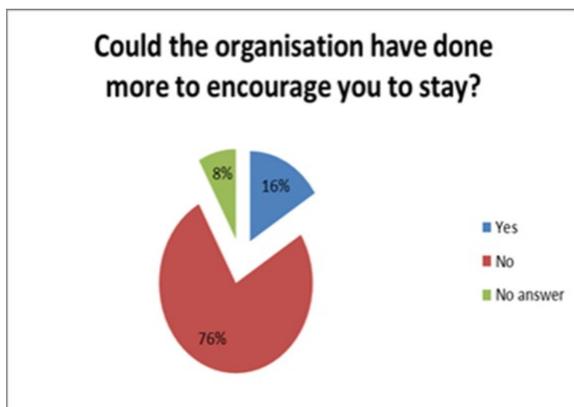


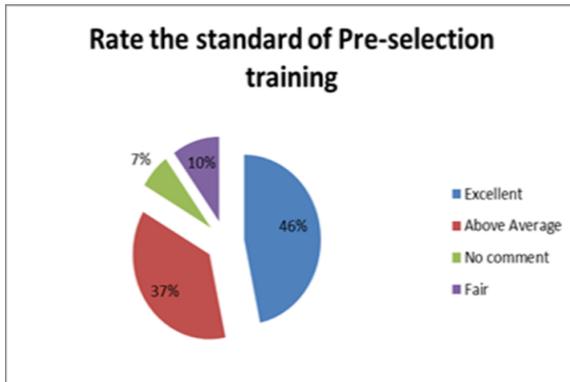
Figure 3

As presented in Figure 3, 76% of candidates indicated that there was nothing more the organisation could have done as most candidates had no choice but to leave due to medical reasons. 16 % of candidates indicated that “more rest” would have played a positive role in enabling them to stay on course while the other 8% did not give any particular reason. Qualitative responses to this question included the following Factors:

Factor 4: Recreation and rest lacking: “The organisation could give me change to recover at least as it took me few days to recover after being withdrawn”; I needed time for my injury to heal but they no time for that during

training”..... Factor 5: Inadequate Attention to injuries: “When it comes to the people who sustained injuries during training, the organisation is very poor because they keep them for long time without even giving them medication to heal their injuries”....

3. Pre-selection training experience

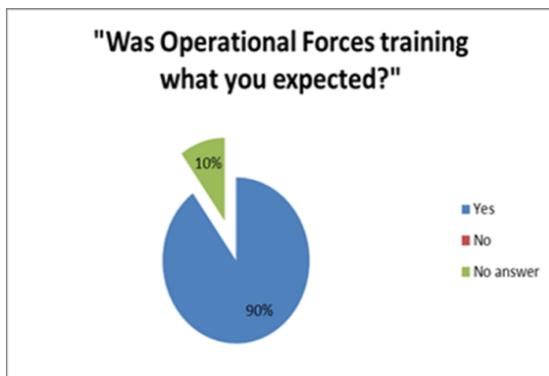


As per figure 4, 46 % of candidates indicated that the standard of re-selection training was “excellent”. 37% indicated that the training standard was “above average” while 10% of candidates felt their experience was fair and 10% of candidates did not give any answer.

Qualitative responses to this question included

the following Factor: **Factor 6: Pride and Belonging:** *“The training standard is high and it made me feel good to be part”.....; “Excellent level of training – best in the world I think!”.....; “Training standards have impressed me and made me want to carry on to the end”.*

4. Expectation versus the reality of Special Forces experience



As per Figure 5, 90% of candidates indicated that being part of Special Forces met with their expectation while 10% did not give an answer to the question.

Research findings that indicate that “expectations not met” as one of the contributing factors of high

attrition rates...this positive response is interesting. Qualitative responses to this question

included the following Factor: **Factor 7: Expectations versus reality** *“I had not expected hard work like this....I expected adventure”.....; “I saw the video and I heard their physical training is hard but in reality it was harder”.....; “I did not know what to expect....”*

5. Level of support experienced from trainers

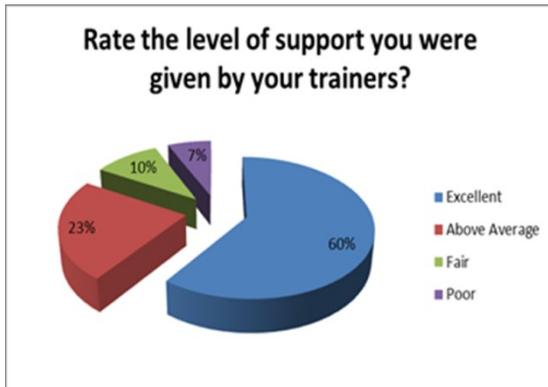


Figure 6 show that 60 % of respondent rated trainers’ support as “excellent” while 23% rated trainers’ support as above-average. 10% rated trainers’ support as “fair” and 7% of respondents felt that the level of support received from their trainers were poor. Qualitative responses to this question included the following Factor: **Factor 8:**

Figure 6

Trainer influence: *“The trainers were too negative and saying I was wasting their time, so I quit”.....; Do not punish them unnecessary, stop telling them they won’t make it or pass the training....” “If the trainer will stop demoralizing them with words and avoid telling learners negative comments about their fitness level, they will do better”; “Encouragement from the trainers is very important...”*

6. Assessment and formal feedback on training performance

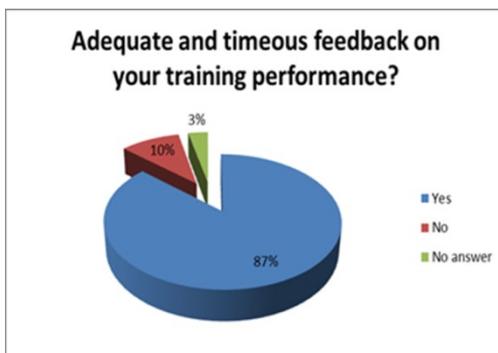


Figure 7

• Figure 7 illustrates the responses. 87% of respondents indicated that they did received feedback on their training performance while 10% did not receive any feedback. 3% did not answer the question. Reasons given included: that feedback entailed you passed or you failed nothing further. Qualitative responses to this question included the following Factor: **Factor 9: Communication:** *“We were ere not given our results after writing assessments”; “If you*

pass that is all you hear, if you fail they just tell you, that you have failed – no further feedback”; “Communication and co-ordination between trainers must improve”

Discussion

In an article published in the United States Army medical department Journal, Knapik et al

(2013) discuss the high cost of physical injuries and inadequate preparation to the military in

terms of attrition rates. Through his research Beal (2010, p.14) confirmed previous research that found that Physical fitness forms the primary basis upon which SFAS success rests. • Compared to perseverance and cognitive ability, the SFAS performance events and the corresponding physical stamina required to complete them serve as the best predictors of SFAS selection and VW. It is expected that the SFAS candidates who are selected for the SFQC will be required to demonstrate higher levels of physical toughness to complete the latter course successfully.

Trainer influence: In terms of the influence of trainers within the military environment, Cook, Novaco & Sarason, (1982) found that the variation in attrition results from the way training is conducted by unit leaders, particularly drill instructors, and that high attrition is a result of less effective ways of implementing the training program. Since effective leaders can be thought to develop expectations of competence and the belief that successful outcomes result from one's efforts, changes toward an internal locus of control should vary inversely with the attrition rate of training units.

As presented through the findings of this research, physical as well as mental preparation, even before an individual makes themselves available to be recruited as a SFO seems to be an important first step. Areas in need of improvement by the organisation, according to the candidates included: Communication and co-ordination between trainers; Lack of feedback by instructors; Influence of negative re-enforcement on self-motivation of candidates and More time for physical rest to avoid injuries and Quicker response by organisation to identified injuries.

The involvement of instructors were indicated as being the most positive while the limited time for recovery from physical injuries were mentioned in terms of the most negative aspect. Level of

support by trainers was experienced by two thirds of the candidates as being very positive. Assessment by trainers was indicated as being excellent with 83% of respondents indicating their satisfaction with the process. Training indicated as being on a high level and challenging while opportunities to experience adventure, the good morale within course, high standards, the shared experiences, being part of the group, keeping fit and the professionalism in which training is presented.

Conclusion

This exploration aimed to contribute to Operational Forces candidate retention strategies during the Selection phase, by accessing qualitative data that allow for the exploration of the root causes for voluntary withdrawals. The data extracted from the process was made available to the South African Operational Forces leadership to be used for various strategic HR initiatives. There are clearly defined areas where either further research or changes to current practice may provide a better understanding of, and ultimately reduce, the current attrition rates experienced by the South African Operational Forces.

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