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The Perspective of College Seniors in ROTC on Becoming a Commissioned Officer

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Perspective of ROTC Cadets on Life as a Commissioned Officer
A qualitative study with the Army and Air Force ROTC
Natasha Kreft with Hans Stoltzfus, and Luke Tse, Ph.D. & Ruth Markham, Ed.D.

Participants were individually interviewed by the two researchers at the university campus in neutral locations. The interviews followed a standard set of questions and involved discussion of the following topics: Family involvement in military – Reasons for joining ROTC – Plans for future – Experiences as an Air Force or Army ROTC Cadet – Expectations of commissioned life – Perspective on current key military topics (PTSD) – General observations about Military culture – Personal coping mechanisms, and so forth.

The interviews involved discussion prompts followed by the participants’ sharing of their experiences and perceptions. Participants were allowed to share as much or little as they preferred and were not restricted in any way as to how to apply the questions to themselves.

Five themes emerged from the Cadets’ perspective of life as a Commissioned Officer. These themes were demonstrated by the majority of the Cadets. In the case of each of the five themes, there were at least 8+ of the 19 cadets who expressed views in line with these:

1. Expect to work alongside, and be associated with high caliber individuals
   “I love the camaraderie of [military] and the team work, but it’s even that idea of working hard. And then it’s all about the mission, the mission drives everything.” (P-01)
   “There’s a lot of opportunities in the Army that you never get to do in the [civilian] medical arena.” (P-06)
   “I feel so blessed to be among so many good people with such good characteristics.” (P-10)

2. Balance military persona with individual persona
   “If the Air Force does not and is not bring your career path, I would like to somehow through either engineering or overseas missions, do something to make a lasting impact.” (P-13 - summarized)
   “I think that one of the biggest things we have to face is learning how to separate the two experiences of being in combat and being yourself.” (P-16 – paraphrased)
   “Whenever I am at home, I am usually with non-ROTC [people], and I try to keep my ROTC life and private life separate.” (P-19)

3. Military training gives specific skills for success
   “I’ve learned a lot about when to make a decision, how to make a decision, how to intentionally observe situations so you can make better decisions, and then just how to be confident in who you are, & building that confidence.” (P-02)
   “The military teaches you to think critically and have a bigger perspective.” (P-05 – summarized)
   “Being disciplined is probably one of the highest skills, but more specifically I think preparedness for whatever you’re going to face. If you’re prepared to do then I think you’ll do it well.” (P-06)
   “Team work is a major thing. The Army always stresses that the Army is not an “I” thing… if you can’t support the people that you work with then you’re not going to get far at all.” (P-14)

4. Moral values seem to easily converge with military values
   “I think that a lot of things in military do relate to the Christian life as far as that we should have our own mission, and that is to glorify God in everything you do, and that should drive what you’re doing.” (P-04)
   “The military isn’t a religious entity, but I think it has a lot of Christian principles in it that I can apply to my own life. Just putting others before myself, and working with integrity, and respecting those in charge of me.” (P-08)
   “I hope to have done something for Christ, I think that the Air Force has good potential for that.” (P-13)

Results (continued)

5. Specific adjustment challenges will be faced
   “If I go into a combat zone, I will try to make sure that everything for my family is safe and sound… while I still do my job and work literally 24-7.” (P-02)
   “[It will be] a little daunting, but a pleasure to serve… the toughest part will be learning who to trust… technically will outrank the Sergeant, but the Sergeant will have, say 18 years of experience.” (P-08)
   “The first impression is important… once I jump into that role, I have to give a good first impression and then work at staying consistent with it.” (P-20 – paraphrased)

Conclusions

• The Cadets all expressed excitement about becoming Commissioned Officers and despite challenges that lie ahead, they believe life as an Officer can be rewarding
• The Cadets demonstrated that their personal values and beliefs mesh well with military values and seemed to recognize that military culture cannot be the only forum for expressing these values.
• Almost all identified specific skills that the US Military train them in, which are desirable in Officers, can also be transferred easily to civilian forums.
• At least half of the Cadets appeared to have the ability to rationalize and compartmentalize their military experiences when asked about their support systems, social interactions and perspective on PTSD.

Limitations & Future Studies

• All participants were professing Christians, and many acknowledged that their answers would be drastically different from their ROTC counterparts who attend public universities. Future studies should be conducted with the entire Air Force ROTC Wing or Army ROTC Division.
• No personality assessment was administered to determine if personality type had an impact on the Cadets’ expectations of Commissioned life. Future studies should obtain consent to conduct personality assessments from the respective ROTC Commanders.
• This study only encapsulates a small group of individuals who join the military. It did not include those who enlist or become Officers after completing civilian professional training. A more diverse study of service members, and perhaps a pre-test/post-test at BMT or Field Training would allow clearer understanding of the psychological effects of military training.

References

Kreft, N. and Tse, L. (2013) The Hybrid Culture of the Military Reserve: A Case Study Cedarville University. Further articles available on request