

# Preparatory Military Training – An Experiment in Integrating Minorities in the Swedish Armed Forces

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In 2010, Sweden abolished conscription and introduced an all-volunteer force (AVF). The new system for manning the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) requires active measures to recruit adequate numbers of individuals with appropriate physical and psychological aptitudes (Rydstedt & Österberg 2013). Manigart (2005) has demonstrated the relationship between the labour market situation and the ability to recruit individuals into the armed forces. In times when there are plenty of jobs available, there are often major recruitment problems in countries that rely on volunteers to staff their defence organizations. At the end of the Cold war, most of the European countries had large, conscript-based armed forces (Szvircsev Tresch & Haltiner, 2006), which soon proved both costly and apparently unnecessary in the new post-Cold War context. In Sweden, whereas nearly fifty thousand conscripts were annually assigned to the SAF twenty five years ago, the last years of conscription saw a reduction of such inductions to a mere four to six thousand yearly (Österberg & Carlstedt, 2010). Since the advent of the AVF, only between 2,700 and 4,000 recruits have completed basic military training every year.

Eighmey (2006) has identified a number of reasons why young people enlist. He describes the great challenge posed to military recruitment when easy access to civilian jobs on the labour market depresses interest among target group youths. Woodruff, Kelty and Segal (2006) have demonstrated that the willingness to serve in the armed forces has declined in the United States. A number of authors<sup>1</sup> have shown that European armed forces face difficulties in competing for talented young people with private sector firms offering higher pay and better career opportunities.

In such circumstances, expanding the recruitment base by identifying groups that traditionally are underrepresented in the armed forces, for example women and ethnic cultural minorities, seems an obvious remedy. Richardson, Op den Buijs and van der Zee (2011) indicate that increasing numbers of ethnic minority members have made diversity an important issue in many Western armed forces. The importance of *cultural* diversity has also been accepted by the military in the countries concerned as (1) operations in Islamic places like Afghanistan or Iraq require an understanding of eastern cultures, and (2) armed forces that mirror the social composition of the population at large in terms of gender, socio-economic class, and ethnicity are an asset when it comes to legitimacy and support.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson, Verweij & Winslow, 2004 ; Lievens, Van Hoya & Schreurs, 2005 ; Moelker, 2005 ; Van der Meulen & Soeters, 2007 ; Szvircsev Tresch, 2008 ; Weber & Österberg, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Winslow & Dunn 2002 ; Richardson, Bosch & Moelker 2007.

Studies of the recruitment base by Jonsson (2013, 2016) show that the SAF mainly attracts Swedish-born men (75.9%). Of those who applied for basic military training in 2013, only 8.3 percent were born outside Sweden. According to Jonsson (2016), SAF admission tests are (unwittingly) discriminating against people with backgrounds other than Swedish. Additionally, foreign-born individuals often take a negative view of people in uniform due to memories of the military in their country of origin, and many who come from areas devastated by war had traumatic experiences that do not incline them to seek a job in the military. The combination of these facts makes the recruitment of ethnic cultural minorities *a priori* difficult.

## **The Preparatory Military Training Project**

The Preparatory Military Training (PMT) project, a labour market policy programme, results from a collaboration between the SAF and the Public Employment Service (PES), with the former in the lead role as organizer. In the programme's first implementation in 2012, the target was to recruit about 500 long-term unemployed individuals of non-European origin who would accept to undergo ten weeks of training and practice in four selected SAF units in various parts of Sweden. While half the time was devoted to civil education in order to strengthen the individual's civil merit, the other half was meant to give participants a glimpse of what it means to serve in the SAF. Participation in the programme was entirely voluntary, and the participants could at any time cancel it without stating the reasons. They enjoyed free food and lodging during the ten weeks, as well as four free trips between home and their assigned unit. The second implementation of PMT started at different times in the fall of 2013 at three units. This article is based on findings derived from the first PMT conducted in the winter of 2012-2013.

In the eyes of the Public Employment Service, the programme was first and foremost aimed at facilitating entry to the Swedish labour market for jobless people with a history of roots outside the EU. For the SAF, it was an opportunity to improve its relationships with what it sees as a target in light of the specific language and cultural skills these people may possess (which are apt to help the military in international settings where Western culture and the English language are not enough to relate effectively to local populations and allied troops). The project could also strengthen the SAF's "brand" image as an attractive employer. The goal set for the first batch was that of the 500 participants of non-European immigrant extraction the PMT project hoped to take in, 300 individuals – men and women in equal proportions – go on to regular basic military training in 2013-2014, and thus be offered employment in the SAF – subject to their acquisition of Swedish citizenship. The project was the first of its kind, and for the first time the SAF and the Public Employment Service worked together to coordinate their strategies.

The Swedish Defence University was commissioned to evaluate the programme in order to find factors of success and measures of improvement for recruitment to the SAF. The PMT project was evaluated by participants through questionnaires (supplemented by interviews and focus group discussions with participants and officers). The questions in the

surveys considered the individual’s mental and physical abilities, attitudes towards the SAF, experiences during the training and future plans upon completion. The evaluation had to be approved by the regional Ethical Review Board since social security numbers were used to monitor individuals during and after training. The results can help provide insights into factors that either enhance or hinder willingness to serve in a military community where people with non-European backgrounds are currently underrepresented though the SAF needs to recruit individuals with expertise in non-European languages and cultures for overseas operations. For the target group’s members, PMT can also be a way to break a negative life pattern and broaden their horizons away from the social ghettos in which they tend to live.

## Method

Participants were asked to complete two questionnaires: one during their first week of training, and another in their final week. Table 1 shows the number of respondents on those two occasions.

**Table 1:** Numbers of Questionnaires Collected at the Different Units

<b>Unit Type</b>	<b>First Survey</b>	<b>Final Survey</b>
Infantry	74	55
Anti-Aircraft	77	81
Armour	91	73
Naval Fighting School	65	61
<i>Total</i>	<i>307</i>	<i>270</i>

The questionnaires included questions with both closed and open-ended response options. The criterion used for the choice of study units was their geographic location, and care was taken to minimize the possible influence of the service branch to which they belong. The first survey instrument was filled by 307 individuals (response rate: 78%), while the second drew 270 returns (response rate: 91%). The total number who started the PMT was 396 people, of whom 298 completed the programme. The project’s objective of 500 participants could not be achieved. Among the reasons put forward were that it was difficult to find participants who met the overall profile requirements of the PMT project, and the fact that according to Public Employment Service regulations, priority is given to actions leading an individual to a job rather than to voluntary training programmes.

Of those who responded to the first questionnaire, 20% were female and 80% male. The age distribution ranged from 18 to 59 with a mean of 25 years; 36% were born in Sweden, and 57% stated that they were raised in a metropolitan area of over 200,000 inhabitants. Participants came from 50 different countries, with Iraqis as the largest group. Whereas only 19 individuals reported that they had previously gone through military training in their home country, including Turkey, Iran or Iraq, fully 86 % said they had completed secondary or post-secondary studies.

## Results

### Participants' Expectations

The survey covered a number of issues relating to what the participants expected from the project, and 79% indicated that they had high or very high expectations. Foreign-born respondents had generally higher expectations than those born in Sweden, and women expected more from it than did men. Participants were also given the opportunity to answer the following open-ended invitation: "Write down what expectations you have of this preparatory military training". Many comments showed they regarded the project as a way to prepare them for a later career in the armed forces, and wanted the training to be hard and strong on discipline. Below are some illustrative quotes regarding such attitudes and plans:

My expectations are to continue my studies in the Armed Forces.

Must be hard and disciplined. Orderliness, try new stuff. Get an insight into life in the Armed Forces.

Other aspects that participants highlighted were related to personal development, humanitarian concerns, different experience, or hope for a job.

I will learn a lot of discipline and to keep appointments, to teach me more respect and language. I expect that I will be a completely different person. "

I would like to work well and become an important part of a group. Help each other, solve problems. Defend the weak and help the vulnerable. It is an honour to be a soldier and be part of the famous Swedish Armed Forces.

I expect to grow as a person, become stronger physically and mentally.

Meet new friends. Get a better view of discipline and respect towards other people. Teach me to know how to survive.

Among a number of answers to a closed-ended question on what was important when applying for a place on the PMT programme, the most frequent were getting to know the Armed Forces, planning to apply for a military position, and gaining an advantage when looking for civilian employment. No less than 85% of the participants also reported that they had a very high or fairly high motivation for the training.

The question on how satisfied the respondents had been with the information received from the SAF and/or the Public Employment Service before training started drew highly variable answers. The least satisfied were those for whom the information had been provided by the PES; 28% of the respondents indicated that they were somewhat or very satisfied with the information supplied, as against 53% among SAF officials. In cases where the participants were not satisfied with the information provided, the main reason resided in a misfit between their actual experience and what the information they had received had led them to expect. Two comments illustrate this:

The Employment Service promised that the PMT would help me to get into basic military training, not that it would prepare me for basic military training

The Employment Service claimed that I would be able to fill gaps in my previous education. This is completely incorrect because we only have the opportunity to read Swedish, English and math.

Regarding the image the participants had of the SAF before joining the project, the results were generally positive, as 66% reported a positive prior perception. One major difference was noted on that score. Those born outside the country expressed a very positive image of the military to a greater extent than those born in Sweden. The most common occasions on which they had come into contact with the SAF earlier had been on an exhibition or in school.

When asked what they thought they would do once they completed PMT, over 50% stated that they would apply for regular basic military training. Some of the respondents mentioned that they also wanted to apply for a place at the Police Academy or for private security officer training.

The survey ended with an open question: “Are there other comments you wish to make?”. Below are some of the answers it drew from participants after one week into the project:

PMT is incredibly important for the people who were not able to make use of primary and high school education in an optimal way. The meeting of cultures is important for the SAF and for Sweden and its multicultural inhabitants. People of any age are assembled here under strictly controlled – but voluntary – circumstances.

Awesome fun opportunity and very good initiative from both institutions.

Thank you for the opportunity !!

I thank the Armed Forces that I had the honour and the chance to get into the SAF and I hope to spend the rest of my life in the SAF !

I'm here because I want to bet on something that gives me a job, plus my father served in the military in Iran for 25 years, and I want to follow in his footsteps.

### **Participants' Views on Completing PMT**

In the following, results from the survey administered in the final week are presented.

#### *The Extent to Which PMT Met Participants' Expectations*

One of the questions included in that second questionnaire survey sought to highlight whether the military and the civilian parts of the training had respectively met their prior expectations. Whereas 75 % of the participants indicated that the military part completely or largely did, the percentage as regards the civilian component of the programme fell to slightly less than 50%. In connection with this topic, participants extensively used the opportunity to submit comments. Many individuals wrote about the military training actually being better than what they expected:

The military has exceeded expectations in the short time that was given.

Excellent work from the Armed Forces' side ! Brilliant !

I expected something like “full metal jacket” with a boss screaming all the time but I was very satisfied with the training.

I had no expectations before I came here, but everything turned out much better, more fun than I thought.

It’s the best training I’ve had in my life and I have learned a lot of stuff and I have improved in various ways.

Some of the participants also commented that they had expected harder physical training and exercises, and a stricter or more abrasive command style.

I thought it would be harder and more challenging.

A little slacker than expected.

Thought there would be more training and a more rigorous chain of command.

The civilian part of the project received more mixed reviews, partly depending on the participant’s background in terms of previous educational achievements. In addition, there was some confusion regarding what one could study during PMT and whether the participants were given grades in a specific subject or not.

It was great that you had to read more than one subject.

We have got 4 different math teachers and it was definitely not good.

Too long days of civilian study, with many teacher rotations.

Participants also had to consider to what extent they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the different parts of the project. Table 3 shows the results on this score:

**Table 3** : How Satisfied Are You with Each of the Following Elements in Your Preparatory Military Training ? (5-point scale, where 1 = very dissatisfied and 5 = very satisfied).

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean Values</b>
Your closest military leader	4.53
The possibility of physical exercise	4.46
Communication with your closest military leader	4.35
The military part of the project	4.08
The physical working environment	4.03
Comradeship and solidarity	4.00
Project environment regarding stress, demands and workload	3.95
Information from the SAF during the project	3.94
The preparatory military training project as a whole	3.91
The job tasks	3.74
The possibility of civilian study	3.51
Communication with the civilian teachers	3.46
Information from the Swedish Employment Service during PMT	2.98
The civilian part of the project	2.97

The participants were also invited to consider how well a number of aspects had worked during PMT. Table 4 (next page) shows the results on these aspects.

**Table 4 :** How Did the Following Aspects Work Out during Your Preparatory Military Training ?  
(5-point scale, where 1 = did not work well at all, and 5 = worked very well).

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean Values</b>
Obeying orders	4.52
Food	4.47
Living in barracks	4.33
Military training	4.28
Journeys home	4.23
Working together as a team	4.14
Encountering the other participants	4.09
Being away from family	3.96
Civilian training with civilian instructors	2.97

Overall, the results show that participants think these aspects had functioned relatively well during the training period.

Table 5 (below) shows the picture the participants formed of the Swedish military, and answers as to what extent they changed their opinion about it, whether they would recommend the project to a friend, to what extent they were given the opportunity to improve their school scores or their physical condition, the extent to which PMT could be beneficial for persons looking for a job in the military, and whether they had ever considered dropping out.

**Table 5 :** Comparison of a Number of Questions Regarding the Participants' View of PMT (%).

<b>Question</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>%</b>
Your image of the SAF	Very positive	61
Did your opinion on the SAF change ?	Yes, in a positive way	71
Would you recommend PMT to a friend ?	Yes	87
Have your school scores improved ?	Yes	30
Physical status	Improved	79
To what extent is PMT beneficial for service in SAF?	To a very high extent	45
Ever thought of dropping out ?	Yes	32

A number of participants thought about dropping out of the PMT programme. The proportion of women was slightly higher in this group, though a majority among them chose to stay. The reasons why one thought about dropping out ranged from personal problems, lack of respect (mainly from other participants), stress, homesickness to job offers.

**Lessons Participants Chose to Highlight upon Completion of PMT**

Below are some examples of what the participants see as the most important thing they learned during PMT. As will be seen, some keywords occurred more frequently than others : respect, discipline and cooperation.

Everything we have learned is important and we can benefit from these things in the community !

Never give up, respect for peers and officers, procedures, tasks.

That there are many different kinds of people and that it is important to be open-minded.

Discipline, and how important it really is to take care of one's own body and hygiene. I feel more adult.

I've learned a lot, but above all how to achieve one's goals individually but best of all in the group.

Such answers can be interpreted as a sign that many appreciated the opportunity for personal development offered, and were surprised to find that they could endure more than they thought possible at the beginning, which also strengthened their self-esteem.

I have learned how other people work, how I function in different situations and how I deal with it. I have learned to appreciate every second, and that you should take advantage of the valuable time life offers. Although I have not made it all the times I will keep that in mind when things feel boring or annoying.

I've learned a lot that I will benefit for the rest of my life.

### **Positive and Negative Experiences in PMT**

When looking at what participants had to say when asked about what had been good and bad with PMT, the picture that emerges is a generally positive one. Participants had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of life in the SAF, and gain lots of practical experience and room for personal development. They also highlighted that they had the opportunity to meet many new people, improve their physical shape, learn to be on time, and augment their school achievement scores. Among the things that did not work so well, defective selection procedures that allowed unfit individuals to participate, insufficiently strict officers, and a civilian component of PMT which could have been planned better (or even cancelled) figured prominently. Below are examples of comments on what participants thought was good with the project:

All officers respect all individuals; I think that I will be a better person after this.

To learn more about the military, experience things you would not normally do in civilian life.

Different tasks, challenging. It has been very challenging in a very good way. I have met people I did not think I would have met somewhere else.

It is good for many who do not have a Swedish background. They learn a lot about Sweden and its culture. It is good for their personal development.

The training has given me very positive things, such as how to handle difficult situations, a different way of thinking, discipline and patience.

On the negative side, a number of participants also thought that the project should have been longer and that it should have contained more military exercises.

Exercises could have been a little harder, more weapons training ; you could have learned how to rescue someone from drowning in the water.

That we did not get to shoot more than 15 shots.

Not entirely clear what should be done because the Public Employment Service had probably promised a lot of things we really would not have.

The information from the Public Employment Service and the interaction between the various organizations can be improved. Discipline among many of the participants was low.

Based on open-ended responses in the survey and focus group interviews with participants and officers, the impression is that the SAF and preparatory military training have had a major impact on this group. The majority derived a positive impression of the Swedish military, to the point of even wishing to enlist upon completing the programme.<sup>3</sup> For some of the participants, the project was also an aha-moment as they finally felt respected, seen, and listened to. The challenges that were overcome, and the personal limits extended, contributed to a positive experience.

As for the officers involved in the project, satisfaction altogether prevailed among them, even though it often meant to work under pressure with limited personnel resources, and the project was rife with practical and administrative difficulties. A lot happened in a very compressed period of time. The leadership challenges of commanding people originating from so many countries also provided many new experiences. An officer put it this way: *“I felt such a personal development. Absolutely amazing, taught me a lot”*.

Unit commanders were also asked if they could see the participants in the project as prospective comrades in arms. Most of them were of the opinion that a majority of the participants could in the future serve in the home guard and/ or as active-duty service members. However, they also thought that only a small proportion among them would be able to become officers, mainly due to language difficulties.

## **Conclusions**

Though the leadership of the Public Employment Service could judge otherwise, PMT was not a *huge* success from the perspective of the SAF. For one thing, the initial goal of 500 participants could not be met ; for another, the proportion that eventually made it to regular military basic training within a year of completing PMT was substantially less than had been counted on : when all is said and done, among those who completed the programme as part of the first intake, only less than 10% – 28 out of 298 – actually did.

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<sup>3</sup> Later experience confirmed that PMT participants did apply for places on the regular basic military training programme. Admission to basic military training takes place in several stages, the first of which is a web-based recruitment test. Of the 298 individuals who completed PMT, 151 (51%) took the web-based test within a year, of whom 87% (131 individuals) were called to the admission test ; 91 of them (69%) showed up (which is a higher percentage than among Swedish applicants). Half that number (45 individuals) was approved (while a majority among the other 46 only failed the cognitive test). Of the 45 approved individuals, 28 actually went on to regular basic military training while the rest took up civilian employment. (However, first batch participants were known to take the recruitment test again in successive years, which means that the numbers would eventually become higher. In addition, a number of participants commented that they had to improve their educational scores before they could apply, which might result in these individuals possibly entering the process later). While 28 out of 298 amount to a small proportion indeed, Jonsson (2013) has shown that the corresponding share in the overall applicant population is about the same.

Yet, while the recruitment goal was to a large extent missed, PMT cannot possibly be discounted as a project that mostly failed to fulfil all of its initial objectives, and in retrospect many signs may be looked upon as encouraging. The Swedish military managed to reach out to a much sought-after target group, and many of the participants felt that they had been given an opportunity to enter the labour market ; the final survey and focus groups showed that a majority were very satisfied with PMT overall, notably with the military part of the training. In their perceptions, the military's image changed in a positive direction during the ten weeks of training. Last but perhaps not least, many final survey respondents stated that they had changed their way of life in a more structured, healthy and socially more positive direction.

The SAF and the Public Employment Service had joint responsibility for the project, which brought some challenges as the two institutions had different views on the time needed for preparation and on implementation of the project : whereas the PES usually operates within very short time frames, the SAF have a considerably longer planning cycle for their activities. Additional challenges were posed by discordant regulations, guiding principles and regulatory authorities: while from the beginning the SAF had recruitment in mind, for the PES the priority is to assign individuals to a job rather than to run voluntary training programmes. Still, compared with the average outcome of other labour market projects, more than twice as high a proportion of those who attended PMT to the end had a job or were pursuing further studies 90 days after completion of the project. The participants did not join the military *en masse* after these 90 days, but they had entered the labour market. The leadership of the Public Employment Service seemed indeed justified in ranking PMT as one of the most successful labour market projects ever conducted.

Interestingly, among participants, those born abroad had higher expectations of PMT than those born in Sweden, and a more positive image of the SAF as an attractive, modern employer, and as safeguarding democracy and human rights. Hence, even if then still unrealized, this group revealed recruitment potential.

Approximately 50 % of the participants had visited one of the information meetings arranged by the SAF before the project. Visibility and personal contact have been shown to generate increased interest in it. Sources of participant satisfaction such as the military part of the training as well as the opportunity to improve school scores will no doubt add to such interest through hearsay.

Among those who at some point wanted to drop out of PMT, the proportion of women was higher than that of men, but nevertheless women stayed to a greater extent than men.

Some areas of improvement of the project were identified. Many of the participants pointed out the lack of (or in some cases incorrect) information they had received before the beginning of PMT, in particular from the Public Employment Service. This issue must be developed so that the correct information is given at the correct time. Some of the participants also lacked information during PMT about life in the armed forces beyond

basic military training, i.e. on the possibility of joining the military and making it their career. The project also worked better when the coordination within the institutions was good. For the armed forces, it is also important to inform staff, as many officers and soldiers did not know what the PMT project was. For the Public Employment Service, one difficult task was to reach out to all individual coordinators in their offices and provide them with accurate information on the project ; similarly, it proved difficult for (often reluctant) PES coordinators to assign individuals to a voluntary training programme which is not its main priority.

All the participants, with some few exceptions, had been in favour of the project. They also reported that their parents had to a great extent also been very positive about it: to have served in the SAF is a high merit and the Swedish military was perceived as an attractive employer. To boot, the PMT project proved a welcome source of personal development for participating officers. Many participants wished for more military training time, perhaps (especially to begin with) to create greater discipline and order.

The lesson learned was that though it got off to a rather slow start in that regard, PMT seemed a promising recruitment device targeting ethnic minorities and women as an effective way of alleviating manpower supply problems for the future.

Unfortunately, the project was discontinued in 2014, retrospectively turning it into a short-lived experiment. For one thing, the Public Employment Services decided to concentrate on its core task and ceased contributing to what many inside the organization regarded as a side-show ; for another, the military went through another round of significant downsizing, which led it to curtail programmes not directly related to defence concerns, military preparedness and ongoing international missions.

However, the recent government decision to reinstate conscription, this time on a path-breaking gender-neutral basis, somewhat changes the equation. Given that force level requirements are far below the demographic potential supplied by age-cohorts of young women and men, the Swedish military will most likely rely on the theoretical obligation to serve to incite voluntariness. As neither its functional needs in terms foreign language and culture expertise nor the sociopolitical requirement that the armed services mirror society have vanished into thin air, the chances are that some of the findings from the 2012-2014 PMT experiment will prove useful in devising a new strategy to attract volunteers from various hitherto underrepresented target groups into the military.

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