

# The making of an Officer

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As young school-leavers and university undergraduates approach the end of their final year of studies, their talk invariably centres on careers. Those seeking to remain young and active but with some solid responsibility would do well to consider joining the armed forces. On average, a small intake of officer cadets is engaged by the Armed Forces of Malta every year.

Why would one go for such a career choice? For one thing, there are few professions that allow individuals to experience the satisfaction of leadership and command at a young age. With that authority comes a corresponding burden of responsibility. On his appointment, the new Platoon Commander is expected to supervise the training of his men, to lead them on operations, to formally and informally discipline those who venture out-of-line, to administer their soldierly needs and finally to genuinely concern himself with the welfare of his troops.

If you ask any army officer what his average week is like, he is likely to give you a cautionary stare before dismissing outright the possibility of a 'typical week' existing at all. As an officer, you may be called upon to conduct rifle practice as a Firing Point Officer one morning and be planning a field exercise later that same afternoon. The next day you could be performing an internal audit or organising the Children's Christmas Party. Court appearances are also part and parcel of the work of any officer engaged in operational duties. You are likely to be trained in abseiling, fast roping, first aid, life saving, light rescue, rock climbing and other specialised skills.

In terms of career development, a local one-year cadetship will open the door to further training in a major military academy abroad. In order to encourage strong leadership development, training at each military academy is promised to be intensive and varied. And this is a promise made and kept...with cadets experiencing taste after taste of the situations that they can expect to encounter later in their service. This process is instrumental for the young officer learning his trade and it is at this stage that he must grasp the much needed and precious wand of versatility.

Once the general foundation has been laid, the budding Lieutenant will be assigned a particular specialisation such as the land (infantry), air or maritime role. The Armed Forces of Malta commissions and employs its officers according to the prevailing needs and exigencies. Just as a guide, however, in its current configuration as a multi-role defence organisation, the AFM is still sufficiently diverse to have about a quarter of its commissioned force employed as fixed-wing and helicopter pilots and on sea-going duties.

Both during basic officer training and as part of an officer's promotion examination requirements, academic courses in War Studies and International Relations are followed. These serve to add context and depth to the core military syllabus and create awareness about the likely scenarios in which an officer is expected to lead others. Officers are examined as they progress from Lieutenant to Captain and thereafter to Major. For those officers who wish to increase their formal academic or language qualifications, it may also be possible to do so through sponsorship by the Force.



Photograph by Darrin Zammit Lupi

Armies invest in the continuous training and development of their officer corps. It is not uncommon for officers who are half-way through their service engagement of twenty-five years to be redeployed in a completely new role that calls for additional professional training. One can certainly also count on a number of career appointments and this injects new life throughout one's service. Furthermore, training attachments are conducted with some of the best foreign military units with a view towards developing the potential for combined operational capabilities.

What, then, are the qualities that one normally looks for in a military officer? A comprehensive and rather demanding list would not omit courage, willpower, initiative, knowledge, integrity, self-confidence, enthusiasm and the ability to communicate effectively. A natural disposition towards balanced judgement together with a reservoir of common sense and wit are, to put it mildly, also very useful. Indeed, anyone not in possession of good physical preparation, maturity and humour need never consider joining any soldierly institution.

One can easily be forgiven for regarding officer training as an insurmountable challenge because of the limited allowance for failure. But officers higher up on the ladder are generally sympathetic with their juniors when poor performance is the result of genuine errors. Frequently, they have been through similar episodes of learning which they seldom forget (or admit!) having learnt fast as a result.

If you feel you can fit in and survive twenty-five years until you can enjoy a generous pension, why not bite the bullet (as they say) and take up the challenge. There may be ups and a fair share of downs but you will be trained to handle both. When the time comes to return to civvy street, you will look that much fitter and a whole lot more confident. Yes Sir! You may even look back and miss your time as a Platoon or Company Commander. ●