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Factors affecting recruitment and retention of specialist officers in the Swedish Armed Forces: A longitudinal cohort study

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Abstract: Specialist officers (SOs) (OR 6–9) are a key category of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF). This study aimed to identify factors affecting the recruitment and retention of this key category. A longitudinal study design was chosen; interviews comprising a cohort of 20 persons were conducted during three successive years. A part of the analysis focussed on the development of *organisational commitment* over time. The major findings included that high organisational commitment counteracted negative factors such as low wages and limited career opportunities. However, there was serious concern regarding the long-term prospects of military employment. Overall, high *affective commitment* was found to be the most important contributing factor, even extending to those leaving the military. SOs were largely content with their choice of career; they considered the work as tactic officers (OF) as bureaucratic and unattractive.

Keywords: specialist officers, NCOs, military, organisational commitment, profession, retention

1 Introduction

In the current expansion phase, military organisations in many countries face problems with recruitment and staffing – problems that are not going to ease in the foreseeable future. Military organisations tend to be even more exposed to staffing problems than other employers since they must provide their own resources to train and educate recruits. In this study, we approach this problem by analysing personnel flows, focussing on factors that influence the decisions of military employees with respect to their current and future engagement in, or outside, the armed forces. Drawing on previous research on retention of military personnel, in particular, the major North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) report of 2007, we focussed the study on the role of the individual's commitment to the military and the factors that drive or counteract this commitment. This study aims to provide a better understanding of factors that influence the choice of military employees, in our case the senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) (OR 6–9), to remain in their present job, to choose a military career through the ranks, or to leave the organisation.

Since the turn of the millennium, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) has undergone dramatic developments. In 2004, based on perceived positive changes in the international political climate, the Swedish Government decided to shift its focus from national deterrence – a role that the Swedish military had for centuries – to participation in international peacekeeping and peace-making missions. Several military units were closed. An all-volunteer force replaced the conscription system, and the organisation was severely downsized. However, when the international security situation deteriorated again after a few years, the armed forces were given increased resources: employment volumes were increased, units were re-established, and a comprehensive modernisation of military materials and equipment began. The conscription system was reintroduced.

The categorisation of officers has also been reformed. A new category called 'specialist officer' (SO) was introduced in 2008, replacing previous NCOs holding ranks OR 6–9. The ranks of these senior NCOs are equivalent to officers: SO-6 to OF-1, SO-7 to OF-2, SO-8 to OF-3, and SO-9 to OF-4. SOs enjoy the same privileges as officers

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(Felldén 2023). For an analysis of the operative role of this category, see Dandeker and Ydén (2024).

It is common in the operative units for 'officers' to be referred to as 'tactic officers' so as to clarify the distinction between categories OF and SO. This terminology has no official use within the armed forces, but we adhere to it in this report, just for clarity.

Figure 1 shows the main recruitment flows to military occupations. Virtually, all recruitment to military employment is through conscription (Swedish Armed Forces 2024).

SOs are trained at the Military Academy in Halmstad or in schools operated by the defence branches. The length of the training is 18 months. Graduates are awarded the rank of sergeant. Depending on the line of study, a SO may serve as an expert in military technologies, in leading and training troops, or in training conscripts. The employment of a special officer is for life. SOs are commissioned under the same state regulation as tactic officers.

Progressing through the ranks of a newly graduated SO is a slow process. Depending on the branch, it takes 2–4 years to become a staff sergeant (OR 5) and then a further 4–8 years to reach the rank of first sergeant (OR 6). Becoming a master sergeant (OR 7) requires about 14–16 years of experience as an SO; after that, one will be eligible to apply to the higher senior SO (OR 8–9) training programme (Högre Specialistofficersutbildning, HSOU). Alternatively, SOs may apply to the higher education offered at the Swedish Defence University in order to pursue a career as tactic officer; however, only very few actually do this. Approximately 5,000 SOs served in the organisation in 2023. The turnover of SOs is comparatively low: in 2021, only 80 resigned at their own request.

It is of note that Swedish senior SOs holding ranks SO 6–9 assume similar responsibilities as Warrant Officers (WOs 1–4) in the US Army, a category described as 'a highly specialised expert and trainer who, by gaining progressive levels of expertise and leadership, operates, maintains, administers, and manages the Army's equipment, support activities or technical systems for an entire career.' (US Army Recruiting Command 2023). It is currently discussed in internal military media if a system inspired by the US, turning senior SOs into WOs, should be introduced within the SAF; it is advocated that this may help recruitment, retention, and the NATO integration of this category.

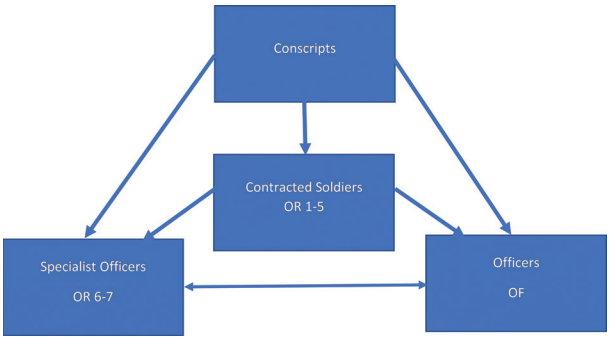

Fig. 1: Recruitment flows to military occupations in the SAF. SAF, Swedish Armed Forces.

2 Aims of the study

As emphasised above, there is a need to secure the inflow from the conscript and contracted soldier categories (OR 1–5) to military careers as tactic or SOs. Most emphasis is currently on recruitment, but outflows from the military is equally important to take into consideration.

Once recruited, the individual military employee is likely to evaluate his or her job situation from time to time: should I stay or should I leave? These decisions, taken together, will affect the flows. It is essential for the SAF to counteract push factors by creating organisational conditions that will reduce the incentives to leave. But what measures should be prioritised?

This study was based on the interview data acquired from the SAF in 2018–2022. It addressed the following research questions:

- What are the factors that influence the choice between military occupations?
- What key issues play a role for remaining in or ending a military career?

We assumed that decisions of an individual person with respect to his or her future occupational engagement often develop over time through reflexive considerations and are not taken easily, applying strategies in which resources and wishes are confronted with practical conditions and alternative possibilities (Archer 2007). Hence, we have chosen a longitudinal study design, monitoring the process behind such decisions, which is often essential from a life course perspective. This makes possible to address a third research question:

- In what way does the engagement in the armed forces develop over time?

Following a summary of previous research, we present below the theoretical basis of the study and describe the study material. The 'Results' section addresses the research questions by drawing on the interviews and presents a case that illustrates how a decision-making process may develop. The results are discussed and summarised, and

the aspects that we believe need to be considered, in order to secure a sustainable personnel supply, are identified.

3 Previous research

In the current expansion phase, the development of an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence and affect young adults to choose a military career is of great importance to the armed forces (Strand 2019). The relationships that develop within the armed forces have been found to create a deepened sense of belonging with the organisation (e.g., Eikeland 2015). Longitudinal studies have shown that the development of an *affective commitment* of young soldiers and sailors can be traced to experiences of meaningfulness, fellowship, and stability at the beginning of the career. The central components of the affective aspect in the individual are a *sense of coherence*, an identity development that coincides with the organisation's goals and activities, and a sense of security (Gillberg et al. 2021).

In several studies, the importance of different dimensions of *organisational commitment* have been identified. A report on recruitment and retention of military personnel specifically addressed values linked to organisational commitment (NATO, 2007): 'Within the military context, affective commitment refers to a soldier's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the military service or unit, it is the *want to* part of the construct of commitment'. The report referred to Finegan (2000), who found two factors that showed a strong correlation with the affective component of organisational commitment. These factors were humanity – which covers values such as courtesy, consideration, cooperation, fairness, forgiveness, and moral integrity – and vision, which includes the values of development, initiative, creativity, and openness. In summary, this major report stated: 'Finally commitment […] is of paramount relevance for retention. When commitment is missing, absenteeism, turnover intentions, and actual turnover are likely to increase' (NATO, 2007, p. 3F-21). A threat to commitment may develop as the work-life balance is at stake: this may affect turnover intentions among military personnel (Alvinius et al. 2023; Berndtsson and Österberg 2023). Nordmo et al. (2023) showed that good career opportunities, perception of oneself as a good fit within the organisation, and having well-developed organisational links reduce the likelihood of quitting and strengthen the organisational commitment.

In a Swedish context, Österberg and Rydstedt (2018) found that *meaningfulness* was a key factor for job satisfaction. Their study underlined that group cohesion and competence development were central components for developing organisational commitment in the armed forces. There seems to be a general agreement between the overall goals and the normative basic concepts that characterise the officer corps. Holsting (2021), by analysing the Danish Armed Forces, argued that the normative perspectives that have emerged within the officer corps are to a large extent linked to the social changes that have taken place in general, while traditional ideas of self-sacrifice and subordination have remained as core values. The 're-professionalisation' that the military undergoes means, according to Holsting, that seemingly incompatible values become part of the military profession and identity. Changes at the societal level in the form of, for example, democratic development, thus, amalgamate with traditional core values that were developed in historically completely different contexts. It seems reasonable to believe that this observation is largely valid also for the SAF.

On the contrary, Berndtsson (2021) highlighted that whereas there is agreement among officers in the SAF regarding the main purpose and normative foundations of the military profession, there is some disagreement regarding the ambition presented by the SAF to create a common identity that includes all active categories within the armed forces, military, and civilian alike (Swedish Armed Forces 2015). Parts of the officer corps see this as an underestimation and downgrading of the officer profession. Similarly, according to Berndtsson (2021), there is scepticism among officers about both the academicization of the profession and the possibility of combining a military expert role with a bureaucratic administrative role. Another issue that is subject to discussion is the relationship between tactic officers and SOs in the operational units of the SAF.

The category of SOs introduced in the SAF seems to be an almost unique initiative taken in response to the challenges presented to military organisation in modern warfare, thus abandoning the traditional view of NCOs as merely being subordinates to officers (Huntington 1957). Dandeker and Ydén (2024) noted that NCOs have not been subject to much scientific study compared to officers. They referred to the Swedish case as an illustration of themes that could be explored also within militaries with long-standing and unbroken NCO traditions and stated that the introduction of SOs 'highlight how organisational and technological factors affect the division of labour between officers and NCOs'. In Dandeker and Ydén's view, Sweden does not have NCOs of higher ranks but two categories of officers.

Despite the lack of scientific publications specifically addressing SOs, some studies have been carried out and published as reports by master's students at the Swedish Defence University (e.g., Pekkari 2014; Holmdahl and Stenbergh 2018; Eklund 2021). These studies indicate that an *esprit de corps* of SOs seems to be developing, at least in the navy, and that SOs also in the air force experienced a high level of pride and commitment. In a study of different categories in the army, Österberg et al. (2020) found that the identification with the occupation as SOs had already developed when they served as soldiers. Compared to officers, the SOs referred to a higher extent to values such as cooperation and togetherness. A negative factor observed in all of these studies was that SOs did not see any clear career path.

In an analysis of the professionalisation process of SOs, it was found that 14 years after the introduction of the category, SOs still did not match criteria commonly used to identify an occupational group as a profession; instead, they could be characterised as a semi-profession (Kadefors et al. 2022). The 'horizontal career' that was part of the official narrative had not materialised. The wage development for SOs was still based on rank; the main criteria for promotion included the number of years served rather than competence and suitability. When occupational principles and professional standards are at odds with managerial and organisational control principles, as described by Noordegraaf (2011), professionals tend to see themselves as the victims of organisational control, which they may resist in order to defend their occupational spaces, standards, and values; this creates a situation that affects the organisation negatively (e.g., Thomas and Davies 2005).

It is noted that there is a lack of studies addressing the decision-making process among military employees with respect to their future engagement in the armed forces. In this study, applying a longitudinal design, we endeavoured to fill this gap, thereby aiming at a better understanding of the complex relationships between contextual factors and individual sentiments vis-à-vis the military.

4 Theoretical background

The analytical framework used in the analysis of the interviews in this study can be characterised as a realistic evaluations model (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Maxwell 2012; Karlsson and Bergman 2017; Gillberg et al. 2021). The aim of the framework is to identify the factors and conditions (or mechanisms) that motivate and influence the interviewees' perceptions of the SAF. The analytical model underlying this study is based on a theoretical distinction between structure (conditions) and agency (intentional action) (Archer 1995; Mutch 2019). Both the intentional action and the structural conditions that surround us give rise to generative mechanisms, that is, they make things happen in the world (Sayer 2010). A way to investigate and understand the relationship between structure and agency is by interviewing and thereby highlighting the ongoing internal conversation which individuals use to value and assess the structural conditions and the individual resources available to act within the framework of these conditions (Archer 2007; see also Gillberg et al. 2021).

Although the study largely adopts an inductive approach, based on a meta-theoretical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency, we have also applied other theoretical concepts that help elucidating how the organisational characteristics affect personnel flows. The process can best be described as abductive where we continuously moved between empirical findings and theoretical assumptions and perspectives (see Layder 1998).

Profession theory needs to be taken into consideration: the SOs strive to become a profession; they are part of a professional bureaucracy according to Mintzberg (1992), but they have not attained professional status (Kadefors et al. 2022; Dandeker and Ydèn 2024). The difficulties encountered in the professionalisation process could be attributed partly to the coexistence in the organisation with officers (OF), who, alongside medical doctors, lawyers, and clergy, have been identified as a classic profession (e.g., Abrahamsson 1972). One of the characteristics of these professions is the strong and influential position they attain in the organisation to which they belong and their unwillingness to accept other occupational groups as professions. In this respect, special officers still tend to be treated as NCOs, a group that has not been recognised as professionals by military analysts: 'Their vocation is a trade, not a profession' (Huntington 1957). Even though recognition of the highly qualified contributions made by NCOs in modern warfare has tended to make this professional dichotomisation obsolete (e.g., Janowitz 1960; Kirke 2009), it survives as an organisational culture in military organisations (Dandeker and Ydén 2024).

Organisational commitment (e.g., Meyer and Allen 1997; Allen 2003; Gade 2003) is a concept that refers to an individual's psychological attachment to, identification with, and involvement in a particular organisation. One widely recognised model is the Three-Component Model of Organisational Commitment, proposed by Meyer and Allen; they defined (1997) organisational commitment

as 'a psychological state that (a) characterises the employee's relationship with the organisation and (b) has implications for the decision to continue membership in the organisation'. Organisational commitment contains three components: *affective commitment,* which refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation; *continuance commitment,* which refers to an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organisation; and *normative commitment*, which reflects a feeling of obligation to continue employment. Employees having strong *affective commitment* are more likely to thrive because they truly enjoy their work and feel a sense of belonging and meaningfulness. Positive emotions and a sense of fulfilment contribute to higher job satisfaction and motivation, which in turn improves overall well-being and performance. A high degree of affective commitment often means that the work or profession is internalised and becomes part of the individual's self-identity. *Continuance commitment* is related to an individual's perception of the costs of leaving the organisation. If individuals believe that leaving would result in significant personal and professional costs (financial, social, etc.), they are more likely to remain in their current roles and possibly seek a reasonable work situation within the organisation. *Normative commitment* is based on an individual's sense of obligation to remain in the organisation; those with high normative commitment may feel a moral obligation to remain, perhaps due to a sense of loyalty or gratitude. This commitment may lead to individuals actively contributing to the organisation's goals and success, but the emotional attachment to the work rests more on duty than identification and intrinsic devotion. Among co-workers, a 'structure of belonging' that strengthens work attachment may develop (Kirke 2009). Horn et al. (2017), in a review of occupational turnover research, also identified 'organisational embeddedness', where the private family becomes part of the attachment, as a key quality supporting retention.

The emphasis on professional identity and organisational commitment has emerged as part of the abductive process that the analysis of our data has given rise to. The initial analysis of the conducted interviews showed that these aspects permeated the experiences expressed by the interviewees. The three overarching questions that guided the study can all be understood in terms of a complex relationship between affective commitment and the contextual conditions that characterise the work. This applies to the commitment over time as well as the feelings and experiences that explain the decisions to leave the profession.

5 Materials and methods

To address the research questions, a longitudinal study design was chosen. A cohort containing 20 people was constituted. The cohort contained three women and 17 men, recruited at five operational units representing all three branches of the armed forces. We interviewed each participant three times in successive years, in 2019, 2020, and 2021. There were three dropouts, due to sickness, relocation, or unavailability. The participants in this cohort were aged between 24 years and 43 years, and the median age was 32 years. Eleven participants had worked as contracted soldiers or sailors before becoming SOs. Six had worked as SOs for 8 years or more, and the remaining 14 for <4 years.

The interviewees were recruited on a voluntary basis. Anonymity was granted. We transcribed and analysed the interviews according to a coding scheme inspired by grounded theory. This means that significant aspects in each interview were coded, selective coding was undertaken, and categories were developed. Thematic fields included:

- The choice of occupation (why the armed forces)
- Career planning (including views on the support given)
- The armed forces as an employer (pros and cons)
- Work and health
- Learning at work
- Organisational commitment
- Esprit de corps

The coding process was initially open, and central statements and experiences were clustered. The next step in the process was to categorise these clusters through retroduction (Danermark et al. 2019). The subsequent step was to search for relationships between the different categories and conceptualise these relationships. Initially in this process, affective commitment emerged as an overarching theme, which explains the emphasis on this in the theory section. This in turn had consequences for the semi-structured interviews that were carried out later as these were influenced by this theoretical perspective.

Our interview questions were asked so that they could capture the emotional component, but the questions were not always asked directly. When asked about the most important reason for staying in the job, our respondents' answers could concern values, camaraderie, togetherness, and pride; that is, the very tasks that were asked about in the above-mentioned scales. In addition, the emotional component consists of perceived meaningfulness in the

work, a task included in the scale of affective commitment according to Meyer and Allen (1997), and was therefore also included in our interviews.

The interview guide finally included nine questions relevant to affective commitment, according to Meyer and Allen (1997) and Gade (2003), and one that specifically aimed at normative commitment (see Appendix).

In the presentation and analysis of the empirical material that follows below, the concept *factors* is used in some cases. This should be understood synonymously with the simplified definition of *the mechanism concept* that guided the coding and categorisation process, that is, 'what makes things happen' (see Sayer 2010).

6 Results

The longitudinal approach chosen makes possible to study the development of sentiments vis-à-vis the military over time and to identify factors behind the decisions made by the interviewees with respect to their future military engagement. As a point of departure, we give an illustrative example of a SO who decides to leave, even though he has a strong affective connection to the military.

Specialist officer L (army) is 27 years. The armed forces recommended him a technical soldier's job, which involved the operation of information systems. He continued as a squad leader for a few years, but after 6 years as a soldier, he thought about looking for a civilian job. But he still chose to become an SO. Why? He thought that he wanted more leadership training, and he knew that this type of training in the armed forces was one of the best he could get. In addition, the benefits when he studied were advantageous, with free accommodation, food, travel, etc. The training in Halmstad was too basic, according to L, but the subsequent specialist training at the unit was very good.

L is now newly employed as a SO and works mainly as an instructor for conscripts. Can he work with what he is a specialist in?

> I would say it is very doubtful. It is very rarely that I get to sit down and do what I am supposed to do ... and then there is such a lack of staff. I would look forward to working and educating myself in the area that I am a specialist in; otherwise, you lose this language. I get stuck at the basic level all the time.

L feels that the salary is too low, especially if starting a family, buying a house, and so on. This is one of the reasons why many people leave their jobs as specialists, he believes. Another reason is that the career paths are unclear, and the formal rank system is not so attractive. However, the job can provide great opportunities for development:

> In the armed forces, you get to develop yourself as a person ... there are a lot of leadership positions here, and that is the key to personal development, I think. It is training yourself as a leader. Then, there is the specialist knowledge you get. For example, it could be a vehicle-specific position. The technical part and the leadership part – those are the biggest categories if you want to develop yourself. Another great advantage of the armed forces is the camaraderie – it is something you do not get anywhere else.

But the career paths for SOs are unclear, and the information from platoon and unit leadership is inadequate:

> When I, as a soldier, asked: what does the job look like? Then, there was no answer because, as now, the SO does mixed things. It is not a clear position, really, but a jack-of-all-trades officer. What is new is that you work as a sergeant for the first 2 years and then it is a sergeant major after 8 years. So, for 8–10 years, you should stay and do the same thing ... there is no carrot in it.

A year later, L has started civilian work. This means that he now develops systems instead of being a SO responsible for the maintenance of these systems. Now he has the opportunity to develop his special skills, something he lacked in his work as a SO. But L can miss the camaraderie in the armed forces where you 'became like a family'; to leave the armed forces was a big step: 'It's a whole lifestyle that you just throw away.' The salary he has now received is significantly higher than the one he had as an SO: 'It's completely absurd when I think about it … when I compare salaries, I don't understand why I stayed as long as I did.'

Another year later, L is again asked why he chose to leave the armed forces. It was about the salary, of course, but what about the competence as a SO? Did L feel like he was about to lose it and was that the main reason for quitting?

> Yes, the specialist skills that I had, I felt that I slowly but surely forgot as time went on. Then, I thought that maybe there is no danger if I get to work with this next semester or next fall or next spring. But then when I sat down with the boss with my 4-year plan, he said, 'We have a little shortage of people here now and need instructors to train recruits.' I was going to lead and train for 4 years straight. Well, then I felt that I lost all motivation to continue my career in the armed forces …

However, L says that he would definitely recommend a friend to apply for a job in the armed forces: 'It has been a huge development for me that I have been in the Armed Forces … it's been great.'

In summary, it turns out that L received the training to become a specialist that he wanted. He enjoyed his time

in the armed forces and might have stayed there despite a relatively low salary. However, since he did not see that he would have any opportunities to develop his speciality in the armed forces and there was no career plan for him that indicated the opposite, he chose a civilian career with a higher salary and good development opportunities.

In the above case, it was a SO in the Army who was offered better development opportunities and pay outside the armed forces. SOs are generally well placed to get such jobs, especially for technicians in the Air Force and Navy. The fact that you still stay, despite a salary that can be significantly below what you are offered in the civilian market, may be related to the benefits offered by the armed forces. When asked about the importance of pay, a SO (air force) replied:

> It is something that in recent years has become more and more in the centre of attention for many, especially since there are civilian actors who bid quite high ... There are many companies that bid quite high for aerospace engineers. The competitive situation is quite tough. And I have lost a couple of colleagues in the civilian sector, yes, who have been paid better. The salary is an important part of course, but I do not think it is the whole page. It depends a lot on other things, such as employment benefits. We have opportunities for flexible working hours. And you have 3 h a week to do physical activity, and it can be anything from going out on the running track or group training sessions. If you need to arrive late one morning, you contact your immediate manager and then it usually works out. We have many events every year with different sports. I am active and do fencing and there we have had a lot of training camps and competitions.

In this case, we thus have a SO who decides to stay due to the benefits offered by the armed forces. This may include opportunities for paid leave and exercise, as well as access to occupational healthcare.

6.1 Mechanisms that influence the choice between military occupations

The SOs interviewed were largely content with their choice of career, rather than becoming a tactic officer, despite lower wages and limited career opportunities. Why? A prominent reason for the decision was the perceived *bureaucratisation of the officer profession*. One of the interviewees, who had almost 10 years of experience as a SO, declared:

> I did not want to study 3 years at Karlberg [*to become a tactic officer*]. I wanted to work with my hands ... and looking back I am very satisfied with this decision. I would not have liked to work as a tactic and spend so much time indoors as they do. I am much more content with working with my hands and being outdoors ...

The second reason for not wanting to apply to the tactic officers' programme was the perceived *academization of the education*. Several interviewees felt that this programme forced the students to be part of an academic context, including a series of subjects that they described as both unnecessary and irrelevant. Several respondents were also worried about being forced to write an academic essay addressing a subject they did not feel comfortable with. In the interviews, the desire to work with something meaningful and practical emerges again. A SO (navy) declared: 'No, not a tactic. I think it's too long a study time and I didn't want staff work either. I want to be where the business is.'

A third reason why choosing a career as special rather than a tactic officer is *geographical insecurity*. Tactic officers, according to the interviewees, are forced to leave their units, duties, and tasks and move between different locations according to their individual career development plans. This enforced mobility poses a threat, not only to the possibility of staying and deepening one's knowledge base in a specialised field but also to the prospects of establishing a family and acquiring a permanent home in a preferred location. Basically, this is about a fear of losing control over one's life situation and being forced to accept situations beyond one's control. According to the interviewees, a SO has much better potential to maintain his or her professional and geographical security:

> The officer track ... you have to be quite open to move around in Sweden and even then ... you are a serf in the officer track ... it is not in the same way for us. We are much more independent. Had I been 10 years younger, it might have been a logical solution ... then you can move and so on, but I cannot do that, for several reasons. I am just not interested in that life and what it would entail. (army)

SOs with lower ranks may advance to higher OR ranks; however, to be accepted for such higher study requires long experience and excellent notes. Our interviews indicate that many SOs feel locked-in since the promotion system is based on rigid criteria where the number of years completed as an SO in lower ranks is crucial. Since wages in the SAF are largely related to rank (Ydén and Hasselbladh 2010), this was a matter of concern for almost all of the SOs we interviewed. Completing the higher education at the Military Academy Halmstad and qualifying for the grade of master sergeant (OR 8) entails a significant pay rise. However, some of the SOs we interviewed declared that they would not apply for higher study, even if they fulfilled the formal requirements. The reasons behind their preference to remain sergeant first class (OR 7) rather

than moving on career-wise were similar to the reasons for why they had chosen to become a SO rather than a tactic officer in the first place: they would rather remain technical experts or specialists in leading and training troops than becoming immersed in administration.

Only few SOs contemplated applying for higher study (OP programme) and becoming tactic officers. One of the interviewees (army) explained:

> I think that the situation is absurd. It is 3 years of study, and you will be educated at a level much below your own. You apply like anyone, as if you were 19 instead of 27, having 10 years of experience. This flow does not exist.

Nevertheless, there were young ambitious SOs, who felt locked-in and who considered making a career through the ranks:

> Well actually, I could probably imagine it … after all, there are other tasks involved … that means that you will become platoon commander and then you will be a company commander and then you will move up. I think the platoon commander role would be great fun. Someday I would consider going OP … (army)

6.2 Development of the engagement over time

An emotional connection means identifying with the organisation, sharing its values, and allowing yourself to be involved. Perhaps, the best illustration of how emotions may help building affective commitment was given by an interviewee (navy), elaborating on the role of community at work:

> I would say that comes right from the start. It is one of those things that has kept me going during these years. I imagine that if you live together around the clock, as we do, you form different bonds than you do in a 7–16 job ... I think you get to know people in a different depth and that contributes to the community. – It is hard to hide both good and bad things ... I think a lot of times it is tied to the community and when you become part of that community, you also get the commitment.

The SOs stated that a strong feeling of companionship and fellowship was established at work during their time as a soldier/sailor. We found in the interviews that the affective commitment remained after several years of employment and notably even among those who had quit or considered quitting their employment at the armed forces. Having terminated employment as a SO, it is common to remain as an officer in the reserve or to find other ways to continue staying in contact with the military (like SO L above, who now works for the defence industry). This commitment appears to be particularly strong in the navy and, like in the other branches, mostly concerns one's own unit.

A common opinion among those interviewed is that no one chooses a military career for the money, but as time goes by, life-course related aspects tend to become increasingly important. Contextual factors such as family formation, home purchasing, etc., call for a stable economy. As illustrated in the case of SO L above, this leads to ambivalence because the affective commitment to the military is so strong.

The nature of work, place of residence, and assignments may contradict family needs. For instance, a partner's opportunities for work may become a central issue. Thus, being forced to move between different operational units becomes a matter of negotiation between the employee and his/her family. As noted above, this factor is important when making a choice between becoming a tactic or a SO.

6.3 Mechanisms that predict ending a military career

Three main factors contributed to an employee contemplating to ending his/her military career. The first and perhaps most important factor is *a lack of development opportunities*. Those who felt restrained in their professional development were likely to consider an alternative career; SO L (above) actually decided to leave, mainly for this reason.

The second main factor was *family concerns*. Of the SOs who were followed over 3 years, nine had ended or considered ending their employment. Three of them cited long commuting distance due to the family living elsewhere as a reason. In some cases, economic considerations connected to family formation forced employees to choose caring for the family over their own interest in the work and duties within the armed forces. Also, conditions connected to the partner´s work and residence were relevant in a conceivable decision to end the career.

A third factor was the *limited prospects for wage development*. SOs, enjoying life employment, find that staying on as sergeant first class entails a very modest wage development:

> Even if you do a very good job, get promoted, take a course and so on, you can barely catch up. Basically, you earn as much as a newly hired SO. And that is a pretty big frustration for most people right now, there are no ones who think that the situation is particularly optimal. (army)

However, low salary is not always a main reason for quitting. Only one in 20 SOs who quit or considered quitting cited pay as the key factor. Another SO (navy) declared:

> I feel that those who quit do so more because the life situation does not comply with their current job. Not many do this due to low pay or that they feel bored or restrained, but it is rather external factors.

One of the interviewees (air force) considered quitting due to problems in reconciling family life with work demands:

> I thought it was really tough when I got the news, considering my partner and house and having children and stuff, it was a bit disturbing when you got 'yes, after New Year's you will go and live in Karlsborg for one and a half years ... I felt like this: Will it be worth it, or should I look at something else? But I and my partner, we made a plan to make it work ...

Being skilled technical experts, they know that they are attractive and can easily get civilian jobs. But leaving the military is complicated. The SO L, quoted above, thought that leaving was a major step. He referred to the solidarity, loyalty, and fellowship as retaining factors.

7 Discussion

7.1 The study design

The longitudinal design of our study has led to a better understanding of the interplay among contextual conditions, mechanisms, and outcomes over time. Regarding organisational affinity, Allen (2003) noted that it is possible only through longitudinal studies to see how the emotional component develops, and which factors may become critical during different stages of a career. A survey of police officers found that the engagement did not stabilise until after 30 months of employment (Tremble et al. 2003). By following the individuals for a relatively long time, we could see some stabilisation, but also how the commitment could wane. To extend the study and include an even longer following up time would have been beneficial but was not possible due to practical constraints.

An alternative methodological choice would have been to distribute questionnaires to a wide range of respondents within the armed forces. However, the qualitative approach that we have taken here provides the opportunity to clarify the wide diversity of aspects that affect employees' perceptions of the SAF as employer, and their choice to remain in or to leave the military context. Our approach naturally means that only a limited number of interviewees can be heard. However, the analysis shows that there are strands of common perceptions that make it possible to draw general conclusions about the structural conditions that surround and affect the interviewees and how these conditions are related to the attitudes and motives of the selected occupational groups.

A limitation of the study is that it did not comprise any interviews with tactic officers. It would be a natural follow up to find out among young tactic officers, after some years of experience, how they look upon their choice of career. Are they as content with their role in the military as most SOs interviewed were in this study?

7.2 The choice between military occupations

The bureaucratisation of the tactic officer work perceived may differ between organisational units and branches of the SAF, but it reflects the outcomes of an HR transformation that took place in 2012, when the personnel work was reorganised and a central unit, the HR Centre, took over most of the personnel work from the local organisational units (Thilander 2013). This transformation has significantly affected the work of line managers (tactic officers) who now must engage much more in administrative business, resulting in severe goal conflicts (Gillberg et al. 2019). Thilander (2013) suggested that two conflicting institutional logics – the 'barrack-based' and the 'combat-based' ones – have come into play. The general image of the tactic officer's work is that it is dominated by administrative tasks and bureaucracy; whereas, the SO's work is viewed as a continued soldier existence, largely representing a 'combat-based' logic. The results of our interviews show that this aspect plays a major role in the choice of career in the armed forces. Taken together with the geographical uncertainty (which increases the pressure on family and place of residence) that is part of the career of a tactic officer, there are strong indications that the SO training will remain a first choice for many conscripts and employed soldiers and sailors also in the future.

By choosing a SO career mainly because of its job content and 'non-academic' character, young recruits seemed to accept a subordinate role in the military according to Huntington (1957). But as we have found in the interviews, when they became more senior and experienced, they tended to relate in a wider sense to the military, according to Janowitz (1960), who claimed that professional soldiers across the ranks share a corporate identity.

7.3 The development of engagement in the armed forces

The readiness to get involved, to take on a longer assignment, and assign own resources is not only influenced by the current work situation. Age, previous work experience, and education come into play as does the possibility of working outside the military. Furthermore, relatives/family, residence, and geographical location are examples of factors that are more or less important at different times during a life course and can therefore affect the degree of commitment. There may be times when loyalty falters and the individual is no longer prepared to pay the price that an imbalance between work and family can entail in the event of a transfer (Alvinius et al. 2023; Berndtsson and Österberg 2023).

None of the interviewed SOs stated that they regretted their choice of career. An affective commitment, which means an emotional connection and positive feelings towards the organisation or the profession, had been established among them. Studies have shown that the development of affective commitment starts very early in the career, already during basic training, and to an even greater extent when the individual is contracted as a soldier. Important mechanisms behind this development include meaningfulness, camaraderie, and stable and clear organisational structures (Gillberg et al. 2021).

The sense of purpose and contribution associated with a profession can remain even after leaving the military. Individuals may continue to identify with the values and goals of the profession, feeling a sense of pride in their past contributions and the broader impact of the job. Our study shows that even when the engagement tended to wane after a long period of employment, the 'family feeling' could remain unchanged. This means that the affective component may erode when the sense of the value of work decreases, for instance, as a result of lack of career development, but can partly remain in the form of an unchanged sense of community and belonging. This may mean that even if an individual is prepared to leave the employment, he or she may not be prepared to leave the military altogether. Individuals may retain a residual emotional attachment to the profession because of the positive experiences, relationships, and sense of purpose gained from their work. The analysis of the interviews shows that this was the case for several of those who chose to end their career: they identified with the armed forces and longed to return.

The identity as a specialist is the fundamental part of the profession as a SO. The SO describes himself/herself as a practitioner/technician who takes care of the core activities, unlike the tactic officer who sits at the desk and administers. However, many SOs feel that they have not been allowed to practice or pursue their speciality. The career path of an SOs is unclear; those who are content to remain first sergeant and do not wish to move on to higher study face a long road towards retirement where experience and competence development play a minor role. Attempts have been made to develop methods to evaluate competence rather than years in the profession as a promotion criterion, but this has not so far become an accepted routine. However, there is ongoing work within the organisation to develop career development processes based on the competence model of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986).

In the NATO report of 2007, the 'humanity' factor indicates values that we see as belonging to explanatory mechanisms for the 'family feeling' in our study, and the 'vision' factor as part of explanatory mechanisms for the sense of value and development of the work. The results of our study indicate that such turnover intentions as stated in the NATO report are, in that case, explained more by values found in 'vision' than by values found in 'humanity', which can linger and contribute to a continued commitment to the military.

According to the NATO report, there is a cyclical relationship between the emotional component and job satisfaction, which means that job satisfaction is expected to play a role in the development of the emotional component. However, once this feeling is established, it will have an influence back on job satisfaction. This connection is consistent with what we have found in our study, which means that the emotional component is affected by certain explanatory mechanisms but can also affect the continued experience of these mechanisms. The strength of commitment relative to job satisfaction was also found in a meta study on turnover research, which stated that 'commitment is clearly inversely related to turnover and explains different portions of turnover variance than job satisfaction' (Hom et al. 2017).

We have found that factors such as stability, structure, and meaningfulness attracted young people to pursue a career in the armed forces. This contradicts a current view that younger generations need (desire) flexibility and 'individualised' conditions in the labour market; in some literature (and in public media), it is argued that organisational commitment should be understood against the background of different generation-specific attitudes towards work and working life. For example, it is argued that the so-called generations Y and Z differ from post-war generations in terms of loyalty and commitment (see e.g., Ulrich and Harris 2003 and Ayoobzadeh et al. 2024). However,

there is reason to be cautious with the interpretations of these 'attitude changes' since they often neglect external factors that create conditions in the labour market. We believe that attitude changes always occur in relation to obstacles and opportunities, and that they should rather be understood as a response to changed structural conditions in the labour market and not as a 'decoupled' change in mentality (see e.g., Archer 2012). Attitude surveys regarding young adults' attitudes to work show that they rather demand security and stability in the labour market. This may reflect the increasingly insecure and precarious working conditions that prevail for young people today (e.g., Ebert 2022). In previous studies (Gillberg et al. 2021), we have found that the armed forces offers an alternative that is characterised by security, meaningfulness, and stability. Overall, we argue that organisational commitment arises among the young to the same extent as before, independently of generation, if the right work conditions are at hand.

7.4 The decision to end a military career

The feeling of fellowship reported means that the SOs feel like part of a family: there is a 'structure of belonging' (Kirke 2009) and 'embeddedness' (Horn et al. 2017). Therefore, abandoning the military may be a prolonged process; leaving the 'family' may be a major step. There are also positive opinions with respect to the importance and value of the work that is carried out; there is a pride in being part of the armed forces and a readiness to recommend to a friend to join the military. However, as time goes by, this affective commitment may erode due to negative wage development, unclear work tasks, and limited career possibilities, as well as lack of support from superiors. This can threaten the sense of meaningfulness and thus contribute to thoughts of leaving the military. It should be noted that most SOs are young and a median age of approximately 35 years (Swedish Armed Forces 2023), which means that contextual factors are likely to develop over time and become more important in this group. It would be a mistake to be content with the current low turnover rate in this group. Proactive measures need to be taken to eliminate or reduce the effects of factors driving senior SOs to quit the military, especially given the high degree of affective commitment developed within the group.

In the shadow of the officer (OF) profession, which dominates the organisation, SOs perceive limited opportunities to professionalise. This is a situation known to increase the risk of leaving, for instance, among professional nurses (e.g., Valizadeh et al. 2018), a group who share some characteristics with the SOs (Kadefors et al. 2022). As pointed out by Hellberg (1991): 'Actually mastering a knowledge system and its application is not enough to conquer a professional position.'

8 Concluding remarks

The analytical model underlying this study was based on the distinction between structure and agency (Archer 1995; Mutch 2019). The analysis has shown that mechanisms that emanate from the structural conditions surrounding the interviewees (such as salary, geographic uncertainty, and career development) works and activates intentional actions in two directions. On the one hand, the conditions (e.g., cohesion and meaningful work) that prevail within the armed forces create a strong affective commitment, but at the same time, some of these conditions (e.g., salary and geographical uncertainty) mean that uncertainty increases over time. What happens, however, is that the strong sense of affective commitment remains even after you have decided to end your employment. Whereas all interviewees articulate their feelings differently, there are strands of common thoughts, or emotions, that relate to the affective commitment known to be crucial in a decision to stay in, or to leave the military. There is a special social cost that can be associated with affective commitment, namely, the risk of losing your invested companionship if you quit.

In this study, we did not ask questions specifically related to the continuance commitment component. We assumed that the perceived costs associated with leaving were small because as a technical specialist you often had the opportunity to get a better-paid job outside the armed forces if you so wished. This assumption could generally be confirmed by questions about the view of the future and career opportunities. But within the concept of continuance commitment lies not only the perception of financial costs but also something that several interviewees expressed, namely, a concern that leaving the military would mean sacrificing benefits, perceived stability, and social security. Thus, even if affective engagement remains prominent, the importance of continuance commitment is worth emphasising as well.

This study has helped clarifying the rationales behind the decisions made by SOs with respect to their current and future engagement in the SAF. They depend on several generative mechanisms where the current job situation and the career opportunities stand out as particularly important. It is of note that these conditions,

once identified, can all be addressed by organisational measures, at the unit level, at the branch level, and at the central level of the SAF.

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Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix

Interview manual, specialist officers (SOs)

1. Biographic data
- Name, age
- Rank/position
- Specialist area, training/education
- Personal: housing, family. Any recent changes?

2. Current work situation
- Can you work as a specialist? Any recent changes?
- What is your work content? Any recent changes?
- Is your workload as a specialist adequate? How is it developing?
- Do you have work obligations other than your speciality?
- Is there anything in your work situation that you would like to change?
- Can you develop your specialist competence? Or do you feel that you risk losing it?

3. Learning

If you look back on your time as a soldier and on your education to become a SO:
- What has been most important for your induction?
- How have you acquired your current knowledge?
- Are there any special events that may have been significant?
- Are there any individual persons who have been influential?
- What has the formal training to become a SO meant: the general part, the specialist part?

4. The future
- How do you look upon your future professional career? How can you proceed as a specialist?
- What opportunities do you have to eventually be promoted to sergeant major, if you would like to? What are the obstacles?
- Have you received support in your career planning? In what way? By whom?
- Is there anything you are missing as action/support in your career planning?
- Is there possibly any other profession that you are considering – within or outside the military?
- What do you think you will be working on in 5–10 years' time? Are you still in the military – maybe for the rest of your professional life?*
- What is the reason for your choice? What is the importance of the salary?

5. Organisational commitment

Community and participation*
- Do you have colleagues who have left the profession? What do you think about the reasons for this?
- Would you recommend a friend to apply for a job in the armed forces?
- Do you have a sense of camaraderie or community in your job?
- Do you feel involved in what is happening at your workplace?
- Can you feel like 'part of the family' at work?
- How do you experience your relationship with the organisation you are part of? Do you feel like a part of it?
- Do you feel emotionally attached to your work?
- Do you think that you would have the same sense of belonging and community in any other job or in some other organisation?

Meaning and context*
- Is your work meaningful? Do you think that working in the armed forces has a personal meaning for you?
- Do you feel proud of your profession? Do you feel proud to work in the armed forces?

Loyalty*
- Do you feel loyal to the armed forces, making you feel that you should stay?

Focus and development
- Where is the focus of your involvement on the whole? If it concerns the armed forces, the unit, the company, the platoon, the crew, the group?
- These things that we have talked about (camaraderie, community, sense of participation, pride, etc.)
- Are they things that you felt early on (as a soldier for example), is it something that has slowly grown, or is it even something that has come quite late?

Esprit-de-corps
- Do you feel that there is a sense of belonging, a union spirit, between SOs?
- Do you work alongside tactic officers? If yes, how do you think that the collaboration works?
- Are there officers who are serving as SOs in your unit? How do you view officers serving as SOs?

- Are you a union member? In which trade union? How do you think the union cares for matters that are important to you and to SOs in general?

6. Work and health

- What are the factors do you think in the military work that affect health (mostly) in a positive direction?
- What are the factors do you think in the military work that affect health (mostly) in a negative direction?
- Do you think your work affects your health? How?

7. Summary questions about the armed forces

- What do you think is the main reason for staying on as a SO in the armed forces?
- What do you think is the main reason for leaving the armed forces?

Note: Items marked with an asterisk (*) indicate questions that are related to affective commitment or normative commitment as described by Meyer and Allen (1997) and Gade (2003).