

THE COFFEE TEST

When a volunteer went down to the Armed Forces Recruiting Station, he (or she) had to take a battery of aptitude tests, each of a hundred questions or so, designed to determine the branch of the military for which they would be best suited: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard or CIA. And, as the nation was on high alert war footing -- the unstable global situation being what it was, the recruiting stations were inundated with volunteers eager to sign on. Then, as such things often happen throughout government-run, joint military and civil service staffed enterprises, with two sets of competing hierarchies, the facility had run out of the aptitude test forms.

There were crowds of young men hoping to join that day, impatiently waiting in long lines outside the entrance. The supply officer made a number of frantic calls to inquire about the availability and estimated time of delivery of said missing forms, but to his frustration and consternation, none would be available for a week or two.

"What are we going to do?" the frantic recruiting officers were nervously wringing their hands. "The Pentagon is hungry for fresh meat -- and yet demanding rigorous standards -- they'll take away our bonuses for the month if we don't meet our quota -- or worse...replace us and send us to the front lines! What are we going to do?"

Well, everybody had ideas, but as it turned out, none that were feasible, given the time element. The officers were frantic, while outside, annoyed and restless would-be recruits were grumbling and anxiously milling about, demanding to know what was the holdup.

In the conference room, a tense silence had fallen over the gathering of recruiting officers. It was then that a hitherto unheard from, raspy voice -- tobacco and whiskey-cured -- intruded upon the muteness...It was the old Sergeant, a lifer who'd been in the service over thirty-five years and had fought in wars, declared and undecared, 'police actions' and such all through his entire term of enlistment. In uniform, his chest ribbons were so numerous so as to resemble a kaleidoscopic field of wildflowers. This veteran's position at the station was more ceremonial than actually functional -- an acknowledgement of service rendered to the nation.

"Gentlemen, if you'll allow me -- I have the solution to

our situation. It is old school, but it's pretty accurate. We used it in the days before computers and high priced civilian psychologists and such. It's called the 'Coffee Test' -- we determine what branch of the military a man is cut out for by the way they fix their coffee. It may sound simple, but it proved itself to be quite accurate."

"Sergeant, we are so desperate at this point, we are willing to try anything -- even your 'old school' method. Proceed, please!" the officer in charge conceded.

So the sergeant set up the test. It was simple, really -- each volunteer was told to go into a waiting room and stay until it was his turn to be interviewed by a recruiter, who would go over the test results with him. Besides the chair, the only other things in the room was a coffee mess with the usual choices of regular coffee, decaf, hot water for tea, lemon, milk cream, sugar, splenda, etc. There was a mirror on the wall opposite the coffee stand -- unknown to the waiting individual, a one-way mirror on the other side of which the officers could observe the candidate, while themselves remaining unobserved. The way they saw him fix his coffee would determine his future as to which branch of the military he would serve in.

"So how does this work, sergeant?"

"I'll show you." The skeptical officers and the sergeant were gathered around the mirror and watched as the first young man entered in, sat down and then got up and fixed himself a cup of coffee. He opted for regular, milk and two sugars.

"Regular coffee -- regular guy -- regular Army." the sergeant declared. Some of the officers shook their heads, rolled their eyes or sighed in deep resignation. But, as no other course of action was open to them, they reluctantly continued with the 'experiment'.

The next man came into the room and chose coffee with milk and only one sugar.

"Sweet, but not too. Make him Coast Guard."

After him, the next man chose decaf coffee with cream and three sugars.

"Definitely Air Force material." was the sergeant's decision.

The next man took black coffee with one sugar.

"Navy." said the sergeant.

As the day wore on, it turned out that the majority of candidates were mostly Army, Navy or Air Force. Then a particular candidate happened to choose coffee, black. Period.

"CIA!" the sergeant declared.

About his time, the coffee mess in the waiting room was beginning to run out of supplies. When asked whether it shouldn't be replenished, the sergeant shook his head. "Now's where it gets interesting..."

Indeed! The next man came into the waiting room and saw that there was only about a half-cup of black coffee left in the pot and it was lukewarm. The coffeemakers' heating plates were cold and he was in a hurry. So the candidate quickly assembled a small structure out of wooden stirrers and napkins around the pot-- and lit it on fire. Quickly, the coffee was boiling and just as quickly the man put out the fire so deftly, there was hardly a trace of smoke in the room -- and neither the fire alarms or sprinklers had gone off!

"Army -- Special Forces!" the sergeant said excitedly.

The officers were so impressed by this latest candidate's actions, they began to wonder amongst themselves whether there might not be something to this 'Coffee Test' after all...

The final candidate of the day came into the room when there was no coffee left. All that remained was a bag of unground coffee beans...and a pot with some water on the bottom. Without hesitation...and nonchalantly...the man picked up the bag of unground coffee beans and poured them down his throat and began to chew them, loudly crunching, spilling after them what remained of the water in the coffee pot...After which he belched loudly and contentedly, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

The sergeant was beside himself with joy. "I knew if we waited long enough, one would come along!" he said beaming. "This one is definitely for the Marine Corps!"

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