

PSYCHOLOGY

Best Age for Combat?

No one really knows whether a boy of 18 is mature enough to be sent into battle. In World War II, those under 21 were below average in combat performance.

➤ AT WHAT AGE should boys be sent into combat? That is a question about which many opinions are being voiced these days. But objective evidence as to whether 18-year-olds are actually mature enough to make good combat soldiers is almost completely lacking.

No one knows whether a boy of 18 is ready for combat. Or whether he is mature enough at 17. Or whether 12 or 25 might be a better minimum age.

In the armies our troops are facing in Korea, the Communists are reported to be using boys of 12 and 13. High-school students at Seoul are said to have been marched off to camp in a body to be pressed into the Communist Army. Tens of thousands of these young soldiers have been killed. But whether their youth exposed them to unusual risks, or whether they stood a better chance of success in battle than older men, no one knows.

Psychologists have developed tests that show when boys and girls are mature enough to be ready to go to school. The conventional six-year age for school entrance is not right for boys, Dr. Frank R. Pauly, director of research of the Tulsa, Okla., public schools, recently reported to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Boys develop more slowly than girls, Dr. Pauly found, and the school entrance age for boys should be set at least three to eight months later than the sixth birthday.

Inquiry of the various armed services revealed that no branch of the service is at

present conducting any study to determine similarly the age of combat readiness. An office in the Navy is making a study, the results of which are hush-hush, to determine the relation of age to combat readiness, but this is oriented more toward the problem of determining a maximum age at which reserve personnel should be called back to active service.

Some information is available from World War II about the performance of men of various ages. From the point of view of advancement, the golden age is from 25 to 29, neither too young nor too old. Men under 25 were more likely to go AWOL, and the men over 30 were more likely than younger men to become NP's. The Army does not seem to want to trust very young men with the responsibilities of an officer or a noncom.

In combat performance, too, the men under 21 did not show up as well as their elders. In this group, 31% rated below average in combat performance while only 23% rated above average. Here, too, the age 25 to 29 seems best; of these men 34% rated above average in combat.

We have no way of knowing how many of those under 21 were 18-year-olds, but they were probably few because out of 4,228,936 in the Army and Air Force at the end of 1945, only 284,000 were 18 years old.

Among the obstacles facing scientists who would like to make a study of combat readiness is the lack of any yardstick for measuring effectiveness in combat. The ratings of officers are not a very scientific measure.

A research team recently returned from Korea has been working on this problem. When a measure is found for success in combat, then it will be possible to determine what kind of men make the best soldiers.

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Infantile paralysis appears in all parts of the world, even in the tropics and in frigid zones.

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