

Institutionalizing Cultural Understanding as a Strength in the MI Corps

Van Deman Program

MIBOLIC Class 08-010

2LT Zachary N. Watson

2LT Zach Watson is assigned as the Assistant S2 for the 357th Air and Missile Defense Detachment, Kaiserslautern, Germany. He is currently finishing MIBOLC at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. 2LT Watson commissioned with Honors from the United States Military Academy at West Point in May 2008 with a B.S. in Economics and Arabic Language.

The author welcomes any and all feedback and is available through AKO.

“What will win the global war on terrorism will be the people that can cross the cultural

divide...The war against terrorism is a war largely of intelligence and perceptions. As a result, it is important to tailor and temper our combat activities to cultural sensitivities and cultural concerns of the moderates as we pursue the terrorists.”

– GEN John Abizaid, 05 MAR 2004, Congressional Testimony¹

The Army has improved its cultural awareness in support of current operations since the beginning of current engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, but has not sufficiently institutionalized measures to support lasting cross-cultural understanding which is so vital to successful future stability and support operations. My fear is that, once the current conflict ends and budget cuts inevitably come, the Army will significantly cut currently well-funded cultural awareness programs to pre-war levels and be left culturally unaware and thus unprepared for the next operation amidst a population with a culture different than our own.

The Program

To address this issue, I propose a program, entitled the Military Intelligence Officer Foreign Exchange Program (MIOFEP), which orchestrates exchanges between US MI officers and partner militaries to promote cross-cultural understanding within the MI Corps and allow for rapid dissemination of this understanding to operational units. The program has five phases: 1. Slot Acquisition, 2. Student Selection, 3. Pre-visit Country Brief, 4. Country Visit, 5. Return Essay and Brief.

Phase one, slot acquisition, entails a partner military giving the US Army a “slot” by which a US MI officer visits the partner military. The visit would consist of a one week visit to the partner military equivalent of the US Army Intelligence Center (USAIC), where their company grade MI Officers are trained, for one week, and another week at other relevant national and/or military. This is admittedly the most difficult part of the program because it involves agreements between the US Army and foreign militaries, which will likely not “jump” at the opportunity to allow US intelligence officers inside their intelligence communities. To overcome this challenge, the US Army should insist on a reciprocal relationship with partner militaries so that when a foreign officer is trained at USAIC, the US gains one

“slot” to send a US officer to their country. This should not be unreasonable in that it enacts some parity to the current arrangement wherein foreign officers are trained in the US without similar reciprocity.

In phase two, student selection, officers (CPTs and LTs) in the Military Intelligence Captain’s Career Course (MICCC) and the Military Intelligence Basic Officer Leadership Course (MIBOLC) compete for the acquired slots to participate in the cultural exchange. Selection criteria should closely resemble that for the course honor graduate and should include: a 270+ APFT Score, good conduct while attending the course, no academic probation, an essay contest, and selection boards. The first three criteria ensure that the officers sent will reflect well on the US Army and MI Corps because they will be physically fit, well behaved, and will have a strong understanding of the intelligence field. The essay topic should focus on why a participant believes that he/she should be selected and what they will bring back to the Army as a result of this experience. This will ensure that participants understand and can communicate the purpose of the program and why they are uniquely suited to fulfill that purpose. The boards will ensure a deeper understanding of that purpose, current events, and verbal communication skills.

In phase three, the pre-visit country brief, selected students will brief a faculty advisor on the history, culture, and military of their destination country. This brief will ensure that participants are knowledgeable about their destination country before their visit. This provides students a proper context through which to filter their experience in-country, to enable participants to ask higher-level questions while in country with an informed historical understanding of events, and allow participants to synthesize their prior knowledge with the experiences they have in country in order to develop a deeper understanding of the culture in which they are immersed.

For phase four, the structure and content of the country visit will be left primarily to the host country with the exception that one week be spent at the partner military’s equivalent of the USAIC and one week be spent on other activities in-country that enhance the US officer’s understanding of the host-country, its military, conflicts, history, or intelligence community. Host countries are given the task of

designing the itinerary for the visit because this allows the countries to tailor the visits to the unique history and structure of their military and to the sensitivities involved with having a foreign officer as a guest. Based on the feedback of participants, the structure and content of these visits can be adjusted to provide US officers with ever-improving experiences as the cultural-exchange program continues into future iterations.

During phase five, the return brief and essay, participants will give a thirty minute brief to their faculty advisor and turn in an essay that documents their experience and what they learned from it. The purpose of the brief is for the faculty advisor to ensure that the participant can communicate effectively about their experience so that the knowledge they gained can be effectively disseminated to their future units once the participant goes to their future assignments. This also allows the faculty advisor to solicit feedback from participants to improve future iterations of the program and visits to that host country. The brief should be given during lunch time to allow other CPTs and LTs an opportunity to hear about their peer's experience with a partner military. The essay allows for hard-copy documentation of the visit to be stored in the MI Library for access by future participants or anyone researching a particular country or region of the world. It also provides another metric by which faculty advisors, program administrators, and budget-conscious leaders can evaluate the effectiveness of the program for developing culturally-aware intelligence officers.

Why MI Officers?

The program is intended for MI officers due to both the unique multi-national characteristic of intelligence and the role of intelligence officers within the Army. Because intelligence-sharing is one of the most constant and enduring operations before, during, and after conflict, it makes sense to build the capacity for cross-cultural communication and understanding within the (MI) branch which will be executing that task. As advisors throughout the Army, S2s are charged with understanding the enemy and the environment in which conflict occurs. This demands that intelligence officers be culturally aware in order to best predict what the enemy will do or how the local population will affect operations.² By

imbuing S2s and A/S2s with this cultural understanding and sending them across the Army, that understanding is quickly disseminated throughout operational units to be used as a resource by commanders.

Benefits

This program instills participating MI officers with specific regional knowledge, general cultural understanding, and an enhanced ability to communicate their newly acquired knowledge. Participants will emerge from the program with experience in the region which they visited due to both their prior research and their actual in-country experience. Furthermore, these officers will be better able to learn about other cultures and countries unlike our own having acquired the general skill of cultural understanding during their visit. Moreover, these officers will be more effective communicators on issues ranging from specific cultural nuances to the history of conflict in a region to the experiences of other militaries fighting under similar circumstances.

Other benefits of the program include the professional relationships that participants will develop and the public diplomacy gains associated with the successful execution of the program. The professional relationships developed between US and partner-military officers will be valuable and useful in enabling cooperation between militaries facing transnational, borderless enemies in the years to come, particularly as both the foreign and US officers advance in rank and influence. By sending intelligent, responsible, knowledgeable, open-minded intelligence officers to interact positively with our partner-militaries, respect for the US Army and intelligence community will surely grow in the eyes of other militaries around the globe. These rigorously selected emissaries of US Army values and knowledge will learn from the diverse experiences of our partner militaries and send a positive message to our allies: that we are interested in learning from you and your diverse experiences.

Potential Problems

This program obviously has many barriers to clear before it can become a reality. Not the least of these problems is money. Funding for the program would include the extra manpower needed to run the administration of the program, travel expenses, and the extra TDY needed to pay participants. Funding for the in-country activities will likely be paid for by the host-nations, particularly considering the penchant for foreign cultures to be hospitable.

The language barrier could also present a challenge for the program. This should not be an insurmountable issue, however, because the educated class of most foreign countries (of which their officer corps is a part) speaks English with the possible exception of those countries which were at some point colonized by France. Thus while the instruction at their intelligence school may not be in English, the people there would speak it and thus be able to communicate with our US officer. Furthermore, in countries where this may not be the case, the foreign officer which just completed a course at the USAIC could serve as an escort for the US officer while in country. Officers that complete courses at USAIC speak English and have an understanding of American culture and can thus be used to overcome the language barrier while in-country.

This program also creates counter-intelligence issues associated with sending US officers into foreign intelligence communities and the likely attempt to recruit them as sources for foreign agents. This can be addressed by sensitizing participants to these attempts and the particular tendencies of their host-country intelligence agents before their visit or by changing the program slightly to send pairs of US MI officers together to foreign countries to be "battle-buddies" for one another.

The lack of interest by foreign militaries is likely the largest hurdle to be overcome. I addressed this in my discussion of the slot acquisition phase and again repeat my suggestion that the US Army make foreign slot provision a necessary component of the process of accepting foreign military officers in USAIC courses.

An issue also arises concerning the ratio of CPTs to LTs to send on exchanges. CPTs completing the career course are more likely to stay in the Army and will be placed in S2 slots of higher level commanders immediately following their completion of the MICCC, so they may be more cost effective and will hold more sway with maneuver commanders than LTs who serve as A/S2s and may leave the Army after four years. Conversely, LTs are more open minded and are more receptive to new and foreign ideas than CPTs who have already been hardened in to the US Army mode of thinking. This can make them more effective learners and subsequent communicators of their experiences. An ideal ratio would include students from both courses, but would favor LTs three for every two CPTs.

Indicators of Higher-Level Support

“As Secretary of Defense, I have repeatedly made the argument in favor of institutionalizing counterinsurgency skills and the ability to conduct stability and support operations,” said Robert Gates in his recent *Foreign Affairs* article on defense transformation.³ Gates also speaks of building the capacity of our partner security forces, presumably through increased interaction between militaries. This program fits into his vision of US strategy.

MG Custer, the head of the MI Corps, speaks of how C2 no longer means “command and control,” but rather “collaboration and cooperation,” which are two characteristics that this program clearly advances within the MI Corps⁴.

Finally, with the transition to a new political administration, new political appointees hoping to institutionalize changes that correct for the challenges faced by the military in Iraq and Afghanistan will be more apt to adopt radical change through new programs that foster international cooperation and the use of “soft power.” This program fits such a description.

Conclusion

While the Army reduces its commitment in Iraq and increases its commitment in Afghanistan, future conflicts loom in both predictable and unforeseen places; the Army should prepare itself for these often unpredictable eventualities by building its competency in cross-cultural understanding of cultures and militaries around the world whom we may fight beside in future multinational operations or whom we may fight against. While some details of the program are flexible and must be decided upon (i.e. ratio of CPTs to LTs, the precise structure of foreign-country visits, etc.), the not-so-basic framework of the program exists and should be seriously considered as a way to institutionalize cross-cultural understanding as a long term strength for the Army.

¹What are possible problems that we will have? (Tyson 2004)

²(Arcuri 2007, 23)

³(Gates 2009)

⁴(Custer 2009)

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