

Integrating Language and Cultural Knowledge into the Army Officer Corps

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“Counterinsurgency (COIN) is about people. U.S. forces must understand the people of the host nation, the insurgents, and the host-nation (HN) government. Commanders and planners require insight into cultures, perceptions, values, beliefs, interests and decision-making processes of individuals and groups.”- Army FM 3-24 ¹

As the Contemporary Operating Environment (COE) has shifted away from a necessity to apply conventional tactics and towards a counterinsurgency fight, culture has become increasingly important to the United States Army. In the wake of such a tremendous tactical policy change, the U.S. Army must find a way to increase the cultural knowledge and strategic language capabilities within its Officer Corps. The Army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) recognizes this need and is seeking innovative ways to tackle such a challenge. By promoting the acquisition of culture and language comprehension before individuals become commissioned, the Army can save both time and money in training officers to prepare for the COIN fight. I propose implementing Order of Merit Score (OMS) and financial incentives for ROTC cadets who study abroad and/or demonstrate a proficiency in a strategic language.

General William S. Wallace, the current TRADOC Commander, hosted a media roundtable in October of 2007 in which he discussed his plan to improve language skills within the Army through doctrinal changes. GEN Wallace said, “I, for example, think that every one of our ROTC scholarship recipients ought to be required to take a strategic

¹ Headquarters Department of the Army, “Counterinsurgency: FM 3-24.” Washington, DC, 15 December 2006. page 3-1, paragraph 3-2.

language for some period of time.”² Such a change in the ROTC curriculum would certainly benefit both the COIN fight and diplomatic relations with other nations. Compared to today, significantly more officers would speak a strategic language proficiently. Furthermore, this requirement would enable the Army to conserve training time and DOD funding, as cadets would learn the languages while still in college before they become commissioned. However, one fundamental problem with a strategic language requirement is recruitment.

Lately, recruitment has proven difficult for many ROTC programs. Like the rest of the Army, ROTC programs have felt pressure to recruit increased numbers of individuals from a nation whose tolerance for current conflicts is waning. Another requirement would most likely deter more individuals from pursuing Army ROTC in college. However, implementation of a language program with incentives instead of requirements, may contribute to an improved recruitment and retention rate as well as an increase in language proficiency within the Army Officer Corps.

Explaining the Order of Merit Score

During the fall semester before graduation, each graduating ROTC cadet receives an Order of Merit Score (OMS) based on academics, leadership, and physical attributes. The “Academics” section includes the cadet’s college GPA up until the semester before the score is calculated (usually taken from freshman through junior year), and counts as 40% of the OMS. Leadership is based on how the cadet performs as a leader on campus (to include extracurricular activities) and at Leadership Development and Assessment Course (LDAC or BOLC I) and counts as 45% of the OMS. Finally, physical performance includes the cadet’s APFT score, swim test and athletics participation and counts toward 15% of the overall OMS. Furthermore, a cadet can receive one additional point if rated in the top five of his or her platoon at LDAC, and 0.5 additional points for

² **General William S. Wallace, “Gen. William S. Wallace Commanding General, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Transcript from media roundtable,” Oct. 31, 2007. US Army Training and Doctrine Command Office of the Chief of Public Affairs. Available from <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/pao/Speeches%20and%20Transcripts/Gen.%20Wallace%20Media%20Roundtable%20Oct.%2031%202007.html>; Internet; accessed 02 November 2008.**

achieving the RECONDO honor, by attaining high scores in all of their skills sets at LDAC. Though almost impossible, a perfect OMS would total 101.5%.³

Once calculated, each ROTC cadet's OMS is ranked among all other ROTC cadets in the nation to create the National Order of Merit List (National OML). Based on this OML, and the number of slots allotted to each Army branch (AR, IN, MI) and type of service (Active, Reserve, or National Guard), cadets can figure what type of appointment to expect upon commissioning. Theoretically, the higher a cadet's rank on the OML, the greater his or her chance of getting a Branch they desire (though this does not always correlate due to intricacies between branch slots and accessions requirements).

Nonetheless, based on the popularity of some branches over others, additional OMS points for language mastery would help allocate language proficient officers to the branches that generally need more language capabilities. For example, popular branches such as Military Intelligence and Infantry generally have a greater necessity for language proficient Soldiers, as those individuals interact with foreign languages more often than individuals in some of the-less popular branches might. A cadet who gets extra points for showing mastery of a strategic language would therefore have a better opportunity to select a more sought-after branch, which would in turn enjoy more utilization of the individual's language skill set.

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Within the "academic" section of the OMS Model, "Cadet training and extracurricular activities" count for 6.75% of the individual's overall score. Opportunities for OMS points include activities such as drill team, color guard, band member, community service, ROTC recruiter, and debate team, all of which certainly require both commitment and leadership skills. However, though the OMS Model allocates credit for the aforementioned activities, it does not currently give any credit to mastery of a foreign language. Foreign language study requires equal if not more

³ "FY08 ROTC Branch Fill Rates Information Presentation." Available from <https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ro/www/armyrotc/FY08accessions.ppt>; Internet; accessed 03 November 2008.

⁴ "FY08 ROTC Branch Fill Rates Information Presentation." Internet.

commitment and drive than select extracurricular activities. Moreover, language skills are arguably more beneficial to today's Army than skills acquired through participation in activities such as community service or drill team.

Integrating Language Proficiency into the OMS Model

In order to appropriately apportion the correct amount of attention and credit deserved to the acquisition of a strategic foreign language skill set, I propose implementing a similar point allocation to that of the extra credit assigned to "Top 5 in Platoon at LDAC," and "RECONDO." A cadet must take the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT), the test normally designed to designate linguists in the Army, and score anywhere between a 1-,1- and a 4+,4+ (or 5+, 5+ in Arabic) for listening comprehension and reading comprehension. A cadet would receive 0.25 extra credit points added to the overall OMS for each level of mastery he or she attained in a strategic language.

A strategic language includes any language TRADOC deems in demand and strategically important in the COE. Some examples include Arabic, Farsi, Pashtu, Dari, Russian, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, or even French or Spanish. Non-strategic languages available for DLPT testing would earn half the amount of points as strategic languages, as general language mastery is still important and ought to be rewarded. For example, a cadet who scores a 1, 2 in a strategic language would get a total of 1.75 extra points. Similarly a cadet who scores a 1+, 2+ would earn 2.25 points. A cadet who scores a 1+, 2+ in a non-strategic language would earn 1.125 extra credit points on the OMS.

Language and Cultural Understanding Reinforced by Study Abroad

West Point has enjoyed considerable success with its foreign language and study abroad program. Since 9/11, the program has grown rather significantly. Current Dean of the Academy, BG Patrick Finnegan, and other influential General Officers are pushing for the program to take an even more important role in the Academy's curriculum. USMA cadets are encouraged to study a strategic language while at West Point and are offered the opportunity to study abroad for one semester, completely financed. USMA

cadets are urged to study abroad at foreign military academies, however some students are allowed to pursue a civilian foreign university.⁵

A similar program would also prove effective in ROTC, especially with the incentive to receive compensation for a study abroad semester. Compensation for a study abroad semester equivalent to the cost of a semester at home would greatly alleviate cost to the cadet. Likewise, this compensation would still be a reasonable cost for ROTC to bear, as the cadet would cost the Army the same amount if he or she did not opt to study abroad. Such an agreement would greatly increase cadet aspiration to study abroad, and could thus also be used as a recruiting technique. Furthermore, cadets studying abroad for a semester at foreign military academies would not only learn the culture of the host country, but would also develop positive diplomatic relationships with the militaries of these countries and bring home innovative ideas on military tactics and techniques.

Admittedly, many strategic languages are spoken within countries that are not well suited for the casual study abroad student, and a list of acceptable host nations would certainly need to be established. Nonetheless, language and culture are best learned through immersion. Additionally, familiarity with one foreign culture builds sensitivity towards all cultures. Thus, the addition of a study abroad program would not only be an excellent recruiting tool, it would also allow cadets to enhance their language skills and acquire essential cultural knowledge. Therefore, by applying an incentive-based language *and* study abroad program the Army would appeal to a wider base of possible recruits, while still reinforcing language and cultural knowledge of its future junior officers.

General Peter Schoomaker, former Army Chief of Staff, summed up the reasoning behind a cadet Language and Study Abroad program. General Schoomaker has stressed the need for a new kind of Army leader “‘skilled in governance, statesmanship, and diplomacy’ and able to understand and work within different cultural contexts.”⁶ Development of this type of new officer must begin prior to commissioning and an

⁵ Exum, Andrew, “Are U.S. Military Academies Preparing Graduates for Today’s Wars?” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch/ Peace Watch. 29 January 2007. Available from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2559>; Internet; accessed 03 November 2008.

⁶ Exum, Andrew, internet.

attractive language and culture program would effectively improve future language and culture competency in the Army Officer Corps.