

Language Training in MIBOLC

By 2LT Lauren Merkel

“If all our soldiers spoke Arabic we could have resolved Iraq in two years. My point is that language is obviously an obstacle to our success, much more so than cultural. Even a fundamental understanding of the language would have had a significant impact on our ability to operate.”

Major Kenneth Carey

Brigade S2, 1 BCT, 1st Calvary Division.

The quote above may be optimistic, but it highlights an often overlooked but vital skill in the current operating environment. Military Intelligence Basic Officers Leadership Course (MIBOLC) is an ideal setting in which to offer newly commissioned officers the opportunity to learn basic foreign language skills. Given the refocus of troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, Persian Dari and Pashto would best suit the lieutenants at MIBOLC. By implementing classes similar to the successful Van Deman program, Lieutenants could depart MIBOLC with basic tactical language skills and a foundation for self-propelled learning.

The Army’s previous actions speak to its realized need for Soldiers with pertinent language skills. The Army has begun offering monetary incentives for ROTC Cadets studying foreign languages in college. The Defense Department increased the Foreign Language Proficiency Pay for all military members as part of an initiative to encourage learning a foreign language or gaining further proficiency.¹ Programs such as Headstart offer individuals the ability to study languages spoken in the Current Operating Environment (COE) and specify tactical words and phrases.² In November 2008, the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee published a report on the

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need for additional language and culture skills in the military. This report concluded “Today’s military establishment, its active duty, reserve, and civilian personnel, must be trained and ready to engage the world with an appreciation of diverse cultures and to communicate directly with local populations ... Speaking the language with an appreciation of local culture is a potent tool in influencing a mission’s outcome in our favor.”³

In the January/February edition of Foreign Affairs magazine, Department of Defense Secretary, Robert Gates argued that the United States will continue to face low intensity conflict and stability and support type operations in the foreseeable future.⁴ In these type of operations, people compose the center of gravity, human intelligence can be more valuable than other types of intelligence, and intelligence often drives operations. In these people oriented operations, the ability to communicate in the native language is vital to achieving success. Not only are language skills important for the Army as a whole, but they are especially important for Military Intelligence personnel who depend on the population for actionable intelligence and are forced to translate much of their intelligence, regardless of the source.

Given the expectation of non-linear stability and support operations, and the crucial human facet of these operations, the Army must invest further in developing foreign language skills. COL Peter Mansoor (Ret.), who commanded 1st BCT, 1st Armored Div. in Iraq from 2003-2004 summarizes “In building an Army for the twenty-first century, we must assign a high priority to improving our language capabilities, for in the contemporary operating environment, such skills are as much a part of a soldier’s kit as a rifle and a helmet.”⁵

Dari and Pashto are complex languages dissimilar to English. Both use the Arabic alphabet which contains sounds that do not exist in English and are hard for native English speakers to pronounce. It is very difficult, nearing impossible, to learn either language without outside

instruction, particularly regarding pronunciation. While the Army has an array of language curriculums available, including Headstart and Rosetta Stone, Army officers need human instruction in order to grasp the complexities of Dari and Pashto.

Basic knowledge of one of these languages would greatly behoove the intelligence officer. The foundation of knowledge garnered at MIBOLC would allow an officer to further develop his or her language skills while deployed. While this could be accomplished without previous language training, basic vocabulary words and grammatical structure would better allow a deployed officer to capitalize on opportunities to study Dari or Pashto from their translator or other native speakers. Recent military operations, and many of those expected in the foreseeable future emphasize coordination and cooperation with host nation forces. An intelligence officer may be called upon to coordinate with his or her host nation intelligence counterpart. Communicating and working with an individual who is culturally and linguistically different is an intricate task. However, these difficulties could be eased if the Army officer arrived armed with a basic knowledge of the host nation's language and culture.

The foundation established at MIBOLC would also set the stage for self-propelled learning. An officer would be capable of looking up new words and learning vocabulary specific to the task at hand. As an officer progresses in scope and knowledge, he or she would be able to pick up key words and phrases when listening to native speakers. Finally, officers with a basic knowledge of Pashto or Dari could teach basic language skills to their subordinates or peers, exponentially expanding the long term benefits of this program.

The Van Deman program is abstract in nature and it can be difficult for newly commissioned lieutenants to see the tangible, applied benefits, though they certainly exist. Nonetheless, the Van Deman program has met with considerable success. The benefits of a language training program,

styled after the Van Deman program, would be more palpable. A language training program would bring an element of practicality currently lacking in the Van Deman program. I polled three classes in MIBOLC and on average, approximately 55% of students expressed interest in voluntary language classes.⁶ One person was disappointed when I explained that the program was only theoretical at this time.

The schedule of the language program could mimic the Van Deman program, holding classes during lunchtime. Language classes must be taught more frequently, at least once, but preferably twice per week. Like the Van Deman program, languages classes would be largely non-sequential in order to prevent a large drain on instructor resources and time as numerous classes cycle through MIBOLC at any given time. Languages classes would be organized into core classes and electives with the core classes offered more frequently and lasting for several class periods. Students would be required to complete the core classes before the electives, but there will be no required sequential order for the electives. Core classes would be offered on a different day of the week than the elective classes to ensure that students who have already completed the core classes have other options on weeks when core classes are offered. For example, core classes could be offered on Mondays and Wednesdays, with electives offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Example 1: Timeline
Week 0: New MIBOLC Class Starts. Elective A offered for previous classes on T/R.
Week 1: Core Class 1 (Alphabet) offered on M/W. Elective B offered for previous classes on T/R.
Week 2: Core Class 2 (Basic Sentence Structure) offered on M/W. Elective C offered for previous classes on T/R.
Week 3: Elective D offered on T/R.
Week 4: Elective E offered on T/R
Week 5: New MIBOLC Class Starts. Elective F offered for previous classes on T/R.
Week 6: Core Class 1 (Alphabet) offered on M/W. Elective A offered for previous classes on T/R.

Week 7: Core Class 2 (Basic Sentence Structure) offered on M/W. Elective B offered for previous classes on T/R.
Week 8: Elective C offered on T/R

Classes on the alphabet and basic grammar and sentence structure would compose the core curriculum. Electives would include numbers, commands and verbs, common courtesies, military terminology, descriptive terms, and geographic terms. Just as important as language are the accompanying customs and culture which would be weaved into the classes listed above. All classes should be oriented away from rote memorization and towards a theoretical understanding that will allow students to pursue self-driven studies.

The Army has already developed curriculums for Dari and Pashto, as both languages are taught at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California. Headstart is available in both languages⁷ and Rosetta Stone is available in Pashto.⁸ While it would be preferred to have a teacher who speaks Dari or Pashto come in to teach the classes, there is no one qualified at Fort Huachuca. The best alternative would be to arrange a videocast with an instructor from DLI utilizing the classrooms at the Kelley Operations building that are capable of videofeed. By using an instructor already employed at DLI and previously developed materials, cost for this program would be minimal. If needed, funding could be sought through the Fort Huachuca Foreign Language Center.

If this program is successful, it could be extended in depth and scope. Dari and Pashto meet the immediate needs of the current operating environment, but focusing only on these two languages is myopic at best. Other languages, such as Arabic, Persian Farsi, Korean and Mandarin, based on the United States long term strategic interest, could be incorporated. It would also be easier to find qualified instructors in these less-obscure languages. Advanced classes could be offered for those with previous language knowledge and experience. The United States Military Academy at West

Point requires two years of foreign languages classes as part of its core curriculum⁹, as do many colleges and universities. This requirement, combined with the monetary incentives for ROTC Cadets studying foreign languages, indicates that many lieutenants already have some previous foreign language experience. These classes could also be made available for Captains attending the Military Intelligence Captains Career Course.

Former Army Chief of Staff, GEN Schoomaker coined the term “pentathlete leader” to describe the type of leader demanded by the challenges of the 21st century.¹⁰ This leader is one who excels in a variety of spheres, including tactical and strategic expertise, diplomatic skill, management ability and cultural understanding, combined with an innovative and adaptive mind.¹¹ The language classes outlined above would contribute to the development of pentathlete leaders early in their careers.

The intent of the program is not to produce officers fluent in other languages or eliminate the need for translators, but to provide military intelligence officers with a foundation for language study, cultural understanding and ultimately, another tool enabling them to succeed in the complex variety of military operations the Army expects to execute in the 21st century. The Army has a clear need for officers with language skills and cultural understanding and there is time available for lieutenants at MIBOLC to pursue this knowledge. Thus MIBOLC should contribute to the development of junior officers by offering them the opportunity to study a foreign language.

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- ¹ Department of Defense New Release. "DoD Announces Increase in Foreign Language Pay" 10 May 2006. Available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=9540>. Last accessed on 8 February 2009
- ² Lopez, Todd C. "Language Program gives Soldiers head start on deployment." Fort Huachuca Scout. 11DEC 2008.
- ³ U.S. House of Representatives. Armed Services Committee. "Building Language Skills and Cultural Competencies in the Military: DOD's Challenge in Today's Education Environment. November 2008. Available at <http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/Reports/LanguageCultureReportNov08.pdf>. Last accessed on 8 February 2009
- ⁴ Gates, Robert. "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age." Foreign Policy. Jan-Feb. 2009. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20090101faessay88103/robert-m-gates/how-to-reprogram-the-pentagon.html>. Last viewed on 8 February 2009.
- ⁵ COL Mansoor, Peter R. (Ret.). "Baghdad at Sunrise." Yale University Press: New Have and London. 2008.
- ⁶ Class 001 – 24/48 or 50% were interested in the language program outlined in the paper.
Class 002 – 24/42 or 57%
Class A02 – 27/46 or 59%
- Total polled: 136. 75 MIBOLC students or 55% were interested in the language program outlined in this paper.
Poll conducted on 17 February 2009 by the author.
- ⁷ Lopez, Todd C. "Language Program gives Soldiers head start on deployment." Fort Huachuca Scout. 11DEC 2008.
- ⁸ Rosetta Stone Website. <http://usarmy.rosettastone.com/languages.htm> Last Viewed on 16 February 2009.
- ⁹ The United States Military Academy at West Point Official Website.
<http://www.dean.usma.edu/images/academicprogram.gif>. Last viewed on 16 February 2009.
- ¹⁰ LTC Carl, Robert. "Transformation and the Making of a Pentathlete." Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA. 15 March 2007.
- ¹¹ Army Regulation 600-100. Published March 2007 by the Department of the Army.

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