

Cultural Training in the Marine Corps

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Cultural Training in the Marine Corps

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to

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HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

A Marine lance corporal from rural Mississippi is on patrol in Fallujah with his platoon, attempting to locate insurgents reportedly operating in the neighborhood. While the culture of the local populace is much different than what he experienced at home, the lance corporal received basic cultural training that provided him an understanding of the Arab culture and prevents him from offending the locals he encounters. His squad leader and platoon sergeant also have received various levels of cultural and language training throughout their careers. The increased training enables his leaders to understand the culture and interact effectively and peacefully with the local population as well. Even with a limited understanding of the language, the Marines have been able to communicate well enough to build relationships leading to information that facilitates the subsequent capture of a known insurgent leader.

INTRODUCTION

General Michael Hagee, Commandant of the Marine Corps, describes the type of combat environment with which Marines are currently faced in Iraq as "Fourth Generation Warfare." Fourth generation warfare, or asymmetrical warfare, involves "conflict that deviates from the norm of force-on-force warfare."¹ This new warfare concept expands upon the "Three Block War" described by former Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Charles Krulak: Marines providing humanitarian assistance to the local populace on one block, attempting to keep warring tribes, clans, or factions from fighting each other on the next, while engaging in high intensity conflict against an insurgency on the third block. Achieving operational success in a fourth generation warfare environment requires positive interaction between Marines and the local populace. However, building such relationships requires cultural and linguistic understanding. In order to deal with the problems presented current and future operational environment, the Marine Corps should implement cultural and linguistic training programs for all Marines, similar to the Foreign Area Officers (FAO) model.

¹ Staff Sergeant Cindy Fisher, USMC. "CMC: Changes in Corps' future will benefit Marines." *Headquarters Marine Corps, June (2005)*. <http://www.usmc.mil/marinelink>

CURRENT OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The Marine Corps has a history of language cultural appreciation dating back to the Spanish-American War. However, while the importance of cultural and linguistic skills declined during the Cold War, it has emerged once again during recent operations.²

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

Marine FAOs have utilized cultural and linguistic skills to provide valuable links between U.S. and Iraqi leaders. "FAOs help moderate progress and minimize negative fallout by developing relationships with Iraqi civic and military leaders, as well as sheiks and imams, which allow the Iraqis a venue to air their grievances to someone who understands their concerns and has the ability to pass those concerns on to higher authorities. For instance, Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Carroll, a Marine FAO, served as military aide-de-camp and military spokesman for Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, the former coalition provisional authority in Iraq, and as military liaison to the Iraqi governing council. He also conducted daily liaison with State Department representatives, the Fallujah city council, and various clerics and tribal sheiks in an effort to ensure the success of Iraqi elections."³

² Corporal J. Agg, USMC. "Cultural learning center to open in May." *Marine Corps Base Quantico*, April (2005). <http://www.usmc.mil/marinelink>.

³ Richard R. Burgess. "Cultural links." *Seapower*, November (2005). <http://www.furl.net>

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM

In Afghanistan, U.S. Special Forces employed cultural and linguistic skills to establish relationships with local warlords forming the "Northern Alliance," a loose coalition of local warlords' forces, who provided a key contribution during the defeat of the Taliban. The value of those relationships has continually proven to be instrumental in providing actionable intelligence essential to fighting in an asymmetrical warfare environment.

FUTURE OPERATIONS AND EMERGING THREAT

According to Dr. Barak Salmoni, Deputy Director for the Marine Corps' Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL), "An improved awareness of indigenous culture will provide a tactical advantage to Marines in a fight."⁴

Special operations leaders understand the importance of combining cultural and linguistic expertise with competence in executing of a broad spectrum of military operations.⁵ During a recent conference of special operations commanders, the types of special operations forces and support needed to fight emerging threats were discussed. The panel included Brigadier General Dennis Hejlik, commander of Marine Corps Special Operations

⁴ Agg. "Cultural learning center."

⁵ Samantha L. Quigley. "Commanders: Special forces must evolve to meet new challenges." *American Forces Information Service*, January 12, 2006.

Command (MARSOC). Navy Captain Sean Pybus, Commander of Naval Special Warfare Group 1, commented, "We've got to field a warrior or technician that is culturally attuned and linguistically capable. Those are the key requirements in the years to come."⁶

The Marine Corps' Foreign Military Training Unit (FMTU) trains foreign military personnel in support of the Special Operations Command (SOCOM). The training is meant to help stabilize ungoverned areas relevant to the Global War on Terror by training local security forces to avoid sending an expeditionary force into the country a few years later.⁷

While the mission of the Marine Corps is different from that of special operations, the ability to conduct distributed operations will require increased linguistic and cultural training for all Marines. Future expeditionary operations will likely involve working with coalition forces and/or local security forces in one form or another.

TRAINING PROGRAMS

FOREIGN AREA OFFICERS

The training curriculum for a Marine FAO requires approximately three to four years. The program begins at Naval Postgraduate School where the Marine earns a master's degree in

⁶ Quigley. "Commanders."

⁷ Corporal Sharon Fox, USMC. "Foreign military training unit activates." 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Anti-Terrorism), October (2005). <http://www.usmc.mil/marinelink>.

regional studies over an eighteen-month period. The next six-to-eighteen months (depending on the level of difficulty of the language) are spent at language school followed by a year of immersion in a foreign culture. During this year of immersion training, the Marine lives on the local economy, takes classes and travels extensively within the country.⁸

While the Marine Corps can not afford to allot this amount of time for every Marine, the model can be incorporated by implementing a "train-the-trainer" philosophy similar to the approach used in the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program. Establishing various (entry, intermediate, and advanced) levels of training based on rank, experience, and military occupational specialty will provide Marine units with an increased organic capability to conduct operations across a variety of cultural environments.

RECOMMENDED USMC TRAINING

All Marines currently take the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) to determine their ability to learn additional languages. Once a Marine had taken the DLAB, he should be encouraged to focus on learning a language that matches his level of linguistic ability as reflected by the DLAB score. For instance, the Marine Corps could implement entry-level training for all enlisted recruits and officer candidates to provide a

⁸ Burgess. "Cultural links."

baseline of knowledge for those Marines who have not yet experienced a foreign culture. For the officer candidates, this level of training would also provide a baseline of cultural knowledge and understanding from which they could draw as they lead Marines in future operations.

Entry-level training should provide a basic understanding of the factors that influence cultures and how bias shapes the way people think about other cultures. The importance of perception and how various cultures perceive the United States based on the actions Americans take should be the focus of cultural training at this level. Marines should understand that there are specific words and phrases that they will need to learn in order to communicate in the language of any country to which they will be deployed. For example, armed with knowledge of how personal space differs from culture to culture, every Marine should be able to give commands that are frequently used on guard duty (i.e., "halt," "freeze," et al). Priority would be given to specific cultures and languages, depending on the current operational environment. When Marines join their first unit, they would be equipped with a baseline of knowledge in the culture and language of the country or region to which the unit may be deployed.

Intermediate level training would focus on the importance of understanding culture and the use of that knowledge in

tactical environments. Language assignments at this level need to be based on a variety of factors-- previous language training, heritage, ethnicity, ability to comprehend various languages based on the score of their latest DLAB, and the needs of the Marine Corps. An understanding of how a specific culture can be influenced or how it influences an operating environment, known as cultural preparation of the battlefield, should be included at this level. In addition, these Marines should be trained to train others and lead discussions back in their units concerning the effects of culture on military operations.

At the intermediate level, Marines should receive focused training in targeted languages and cultures depending on their MOS's, locations of billet assignment, and scheduled deployment location(s). Specific military occupational specialties that contribute to mission accomplishment by interacting with indigenous populations must also maintain an intermediate level of cultural training. For instance, a logistics officer stationed in Okinawa should focus on learning Korean, Thai, Japanese, or a language in the region that will allow him to be used as an interpreter during exercises or operations as he becomes more competent in the language.

In addition, individual learning programs, such as "*Tactical Iraqi*," need to be made available and executed as continuous reinforcement training programs mentored by senior or

experienced personnel. SNCOs, commissioned officers up to and including company grade/junior field grade officers, and specific military occupational specialties and billets must maintain minimum competency. Intelligence, logistics, and any MOS that works with the local populace on a consistent basis or is required to conduct analysis of a culture should be included in this level of training as a step to higher levels of training. In fact, as a minimum requirement, all field grade officers should eventually be able to hold basic conversations and understand military terminology in an assigned language.

Upon reaching the **advanced level training**, the focus shifts to cultural understanding enabling decision-makers to make appropriate operational-strategic decisions based on their understanding various cultures. Maintaining and/or increasing proficiency in a target language from the intermediate level may provide the learners with opportunities for operational or strategic success: They will be able to communicate with decision-makers from coalition countries and relationships will be strengthened as language proficiency increases. For example, cultural training at the highest levels (Prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom) could have reduced the number of insurgents faced by coalition forces today. Specifically, the uninformed decision not to allow Sunni Muslims into the new Iraqi military and government left the Sunnis with little choice but to join

the insurgency, whether or not they initially supported it. Similarly, an understanding of tribal influence on politics would have shown that while there may be differences between the Sunni and Shi'a populace, not all Sunnis supported the insurgency or the former regime.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

CONFUSION/HESITATION

One could argue that too much cultural training will only confuse Marines and cause them to hesitate on the battlefield. For instance, in an effort to build the local populace's trust, Marines are encouraged to meet with the local populace. In an effort establish these relationships, the Marines could be lured into a residence or building--only to find out that the owner supports the insurgency. These Marines could expose themselves to a deadly attack from a suicide bomber, improvised explosive device, or ambush. However, the training program discussed here marginalizes this argument (1) by focusing the level of cultural training on the individual's experience level and amount of baseline knowledge and (2) by mixing cultural training programs with tactical unit-level training. Consequently, regardless of linguistic ability or cultural awareness, the Marine would also possess situational awareness and would know how to mitigate risks.

COST vs BENEFIT

Another argument is that the cost of cultural training outweighs the benefit provided to the Marine Corps. Marines' schedules already include too many training programs to conduct any type of quality of cultural/linguistic training that will benefit the Marine Corps. This argument operates with the assumption that every bit of extra training takes away from the primary mission of the unit. However, cultural/linguistic training actually is a force multiplier that enables a unit to conduct its primary mission more efficiently. In addition, implementing a solid mix of tactical and cultural training during exercises will strengthen the readiness of forces preparing to deploy in support of combat operations because they will be better prepared to deal with the cultural challenges of operating in a foreign country.

CONCLUSION

The Marine Corps trains warriors, pure and simple. As warriors, Marines look to exploit every opportunity for success in defeating the enemy. Cultural and linguistic training programs are consistent with the Marine Corps' mission and, when mixed with tactical unit-level training, provide Marine units with another weapon to employ as new threats emerge in the Global War on Terror.

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