

Investing a considerable amount of time and money into the international officers programs (foreign area officer (FAO)/regional area officer (RAO)), the Marine Corps has not yet developed a comprehensive plan to capture and exploit cultural expertise. Experience in Iraq has proven the requirement for true cultural and regional professionals, and we have felt the impact of our relative weakness in this area on the battlefield. Our Marines frequently find themselves feeling their way blindly through an alien cultural landscape, learning on the fly, and sometimes making costly mistakes. Because of our relative lack of cultural training, we're often unable to divine intent, understand perspective, or conduct predictive cultural analysis. This gap in training and doctrine is often buffered by field experience, but it has generally hindered our ability to negotiate, coerce, and act decisively in ways that lead to mission success.

The FAO's Role

As Gens Krulak and Zinni have noted, properly trained and doctrinally employed FAOs can play a decisive role in turning cultural differences to our advantage, filling those gaps in cultural expertise. In order to provide commanders with a true expert, the FAO should have a deeply ingrained set of regional-specific skills. He should speak the language with enough fluency to accurately interpret and translate across a wide spectrum of topics and through a full range of local dialects. He should have a deep understanding of local and regional political, econom-

"We have an international environment that is more complex than at any other time in America's history, a time of asymmetry, uncertainty, and chaos. . . . MAGTF's operating in regions and countries where we have little experience, much less linguistic and cultural knowledge, will increasingly turn to regional experts, particularly FAO's/RAO's, to make a tremendous difference in operational and warfighting capabilities. Additionally, these officers, in positions of influence on joint staffs and USG [United States Government] agencies will play key roles in shaping national policy and responses. Regional expertise has always been valued; it has now become a critical asset."

—Gen Charles C. Krulak, USMC(Ret)
ALMAR 015/99

The Expeditionary FAO

'These are culture wars we're involved with. We don't understand that culture. . . . I don't need someone who's only good at the killing and breaking. I need someone with the breadth of education, experience and intellect to take on the rest of these missions.'

—Gen Anthony C. Zinni, USMC(Ret),
5 September 2003

by Maj Alfred B. Connable

ic, religious, cultural, and military issues. He should be eminently comfortable communicating with locals—from the street sweeper to the president. There shouldn't be a steep learning curve when the FAO steps off of the boat on deployment. He should be an oracle whom the commander and staff can instinctively rely upon to know the right answer or, perhaps more importantly, know where to find one.

A prominent scholar of Arab culture once said, "There are no true experts in the Middle East, only varying degrees of ignorance." As it stands now, the FAO program goes only part way toward reducing our cultural ignorance. Middle East/North Africa FAOs go through one of the longest training pipelines in the Marine Corps at 3 1/2 years. They spend 1 year obtaining a degree in national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, 16 months learning basic Arabic at the Defense Language Institute (DLI), and then 1 year of in-country training living in Egypt or Oman.

Despite this fairly solid foundation to what could be a long-term commitment to developing expertise, the captain/major FAO is then granted a secondary military occupational specialty (MOS) and, in all likelihood, will return to the fleet in his original occupation. Budding language skills quickly fade; street smarts and negotiating skills sharp-

ened in the back alleys of Cairo or Beijing are dulled. Advancement and growth are replaced by a struggle to sustain basic capabilities.

Arguably, regional and linguistic expertise is unlike other occupational skill sets. An infantry officer serving a B-billet as a recruit series commander continues to exercise leadership skills and basic concepts that are applicable to his MOS. An FAO serving in a primary MOS infantry billet may find himself on the other side of the world from his area of expertise, working long hours just to keep up with his assigned duties and Marine Corps professional military education. There is little time for language and cultural sustainment, let alone immersion and advancement. When it comes time to serve as an "expert" he is often struggling to remember the basics.

EFAO Requirement

Absolute dedication to expertise in an obscure and complex subject requires full-time dedication to skills. Fiscally, the investment of 2 1/2 (for less complex languages) to 3 1/2 years of training in a secondary MOS that may never be utilized due to manpower requirements seems imprudent. Taking our interest in cultural intelligence and area expertise seriously means creating an FAO primary MOS. This new primary MOS should be focused on providing cul-

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tural and linguistic expertise to the commander in the field, with strategic and political billets rounding out a longer career and serving broader mission requirements. To exemplify this dedicated focus to serving combat commanders, we would create expeditionary FAOs, or "EFAOs."

Focusing on developing skill sets that would directly serve the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) commander, the EFAO's career would revolve around a continual battle to reduce that "varying degree of ignorance" in preparation for combat deployment. Transitioning between

ed MOS or heading straight to Monterey as a new lieutenant, the EFAO will go directly to the Operating Forces and embed with either a Marine expeditionary unit (MEU) or another active MAGTF staff as a G-3 (operations) staff officer. His goal during this 2-year period will be to learn the inner workings of the MAGTF, gain a clear understanding of MAGTF doctrine, and set an "expeditionary" foundation for the rest of his career.

Living in his region of expertise for more than 50 percent of his career, the EFAO will be able to communi-

be Category 1) requires constant dedication and immersion. Currently, nonnative FAOs studying the more difficult languages cannot honestly call themselves fluent even after 10 to 12 years of part-time study. In order to give invaluable language fluency to the EFAO, we need to dedicate time and resources to continual proficiency development. Luckily, some of the best language schools are located in the countries where our EFAOs are likely to be stationed, so language improvement training can be conducted concurrently with overseas tours of duty. For instance, an officer stationed at Marine Forces Central Command could take advanced classes during his tour of duty and a more intensive full-time course on either end of his tour, reducing temporary additional duty and travel costs.

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billets along the tactical to strategic/political spectrum, the EFAO would develop a deeply ingrained, holistic picture of his area of expertise at the micro and macro levels. (See Figure 1.) Having traveled to Eritrea, he can tell you where the harbor-master's office is located in the port of Masawa and—in the same breath—be able to advise the commander on the current and historic geopolitical situation in the Horn of Africa.

Starting his career with the FAO program, the EFAO's first duty will be to gain an inherent understanding of MAGTF concepts. Instead of learning and working in a dissociat-

cate fluently in a variety of native dialects as he reaches field grade ranks. Attending foreign military schools and working with local forces, he will have a broad range of contacts with regional military officers that he can readily tap for information and deployment support. Language fluency gives the EFAO a powerful tool to bridge communications gaps, help prevent missteps by Marines in the field, supervise oftentimes shaky contract linguists, and train the MAGTF staff in basic language skills.

Concentrating in a "Category 4" language like Arabic, Russian, or Chinese (romance languages tend to

Modify the Training

As it stands now, some of our basic language training is insufficient to train our FAOs, and our enlisted interpreters for that matter, in the spoken language. For example, the Basic Arabic Course at the DLI is sponsored by national agencies that require expertise in listening and reading. The Department of Defense language exam used to gauge fluency is also focused entirely on these two passive skill sets, and the schoolhouse demonstrates success through reading and listening test scores. Therefore, the DLI program is focused almost entirely on "headphones and passages."



Figure 1. EFAO employment.

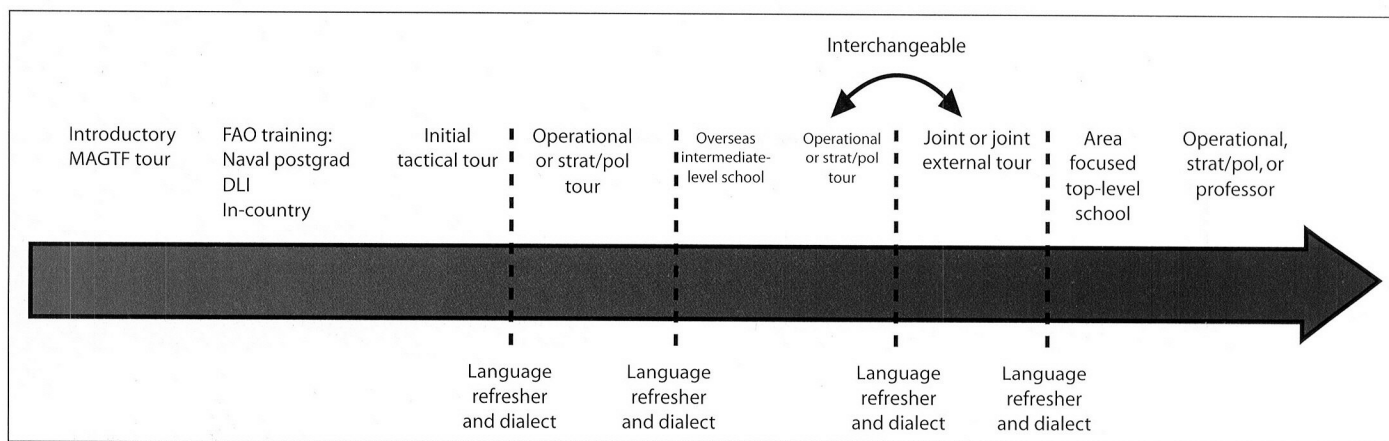


Figure 2. EFAO training pipeline: "greenhorn to graybeard."

Despite some recent modifications to the course, our Marines come out of DLI very poorly prepared to speak Arabic on the streets of the Middle East, Chinese in the streets of Beijing, etc. Although FAOs take follow-on courses during their in-country training, they start their learning process from a deficit. Dedicating resources to training the EFAO will require a dramatic modification of the DLI basic courses, or perhaps the development of an alternative language program. Brigham Young University and Middlebury College in Vermont both have exemplary spoken lan-

attaché post, then perhaps to an in-theater component command. (See Figure 2.) Following this kind of career path will allow the EFAO to develop a profound knowledge of his region that will enable him to shift effortlessly between supporting a battalion commander to a supporting Marine expeditionary force commander (MEF) in the field.

The EFAO should be selected for his willingness to spend the majority of his time overseas in his region of expertise. He must be carefully interviewed and screened to determine his motivation and willingness to

Long-Term Commitment

Asking so much from an officer requires that the Marine Corps dedicate the time and money to give him all of the tools he needs to succeed. Despite some successes by FAOs in recent combat deployments, they are still deploying to the combat zone half-armed in their particular skill sets. Creating a primary FAO MOS is the only way to take this program to the point where it will provide our commanders with the expertise they need to win on the cultural battlefield. Supporting this new primary MOS with a clear employment doctrine will help cement its value to the MAGTF commander. The RAO program can continue to ably serve officers who wish to expand their regional knowledge but want to continue working in their primary MOSs.

The U.S. Army has already created a successful FAO program, and they have dedicated resources and line number billets to develop their regional experts. We can build upon their example and our experience across the globe by creating the EFAO program. The time is ripe to bring Gen Krulak's and Gen Zinni's visions of cultural expertise to fruition.



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guage immersion courses that should be explored as alternatives.

The EFAO will develop a broad and deep knowledge base that will bring him ever closer to expertise. Recognizing that even dedicated, native speaking historians are often misinformed or have gaps in their knowledge, the EFAO will focus heavily on developing connections with academicians, linguists, policy wonks, and local politicians throughout his career to give him a significant reachback capability. Broad and deep knowledge requires experiencing the region from a wide range of vantage points. If possible, the EFAO should have opportunities to zoom in and out between the levels of war, moving from a MEU billet to an

continually deploy to, and live in, oftentimes inhospitable countries. The EFAO's family should be part of the interview process to determine the spouse's willingness to spend so much time overseas before the Marine Corps invests heavily in the officer's training.

Individual combat augment billets are tailor-made for midgrade EFAOs. They must be ready to rapidly deploy from a continental United States or overseas post in support of a contingency or deliberately planned combat deployments, leaving their families behind on a regular basis. We should be searching for young Pete Ellises and Mike Edsons, not someone looking for a free master's degree and a job prospect.