

Challenging the Marine FAO Program

What is the utility of the program?

by LtCol Lloyd Freeman

Since 11 September 2001 (9/11), foreign area officers (FAOs) and regional affairs officers (RAOs) have been all the rage. Post 9/11, in the midst of two extended conflicts, the U.S. military found itself lacking the cultural and regional expertise required to give military leaders and commanders unique insights into emerging threats around the world. In an effort to address this need, the Marine Corps ramped up its RAO/FAO program, increasing the number of RAOs/FAOs allocated each year, increasing foreign language proficiency pay, and helping RAOs/FAOs become competitive for promotion and command selection. The Marine Corps is to be congratulated for turning what was once perceived as a career killing program into a viable one that allows officers to remain competitive in their occupational specialties and attain regional and language expertise at the same time. However, the utility of the Marine RAO/FAO program to the overall requirements of the Marine Corps deserves greater scrutiny. The Marine Corps needs to ask itself what is actually required from RAOs/FAOs and what their actual expertise is. Are there other existing resources that could better serve the regional and cultural expertise requirements of the Marine Corps while freeing up increasingly tight financial and personnel resources for more mission essential requirements? For the sake of full disclosure, I am an FAO, and I found it to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I received a master's degree, learned a foreign language, and served overseas in one of the most interesting countries in the world as the Marine attaché to Turkey. But, given this firsthand experi-

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ence, when I look back and objectively reflect on what the Marine Corps got out of its investment in me, I'm hard-pressed to find a real tangible benefit.

Creating an FAO takes a lot of time and money. Three years of an officer's life is devoted just to FAO training—2 years at Naval Postgraduate School/Defense Language Institute and 1 year of in-country training. For the Marine Corps (each Service runs its FAO program differently), upon completion of FAO training an officer reports back to the Operating Forces to serve in his occupational specialty. Returning to serve in the Operating Forces is one of

the great attributes of the Marine FAO program; it keeps an officer relevant in his occupational specialty. After completing a tour in the Operating Forces, the FAO is now ready to serve his "payback" tour in an FAO billet. Billets range from high-level staffs throughout the world to possibly serving as a military attaché. Upon completion of the payback tour, an FAO is usually at a career juncture where he will either be selected for command or start to look at retirement. Either way, it is highly unlikely that an FAO will ever serve again in an FAO billet. If selected for command, an officer is usually selected



Other resources than the FAO/RAO can provide cultural training. (Photo by Sgt Rebekka S. Heite.)

for colonel after his command tour, and there just are not that many FAO billets at the colonel level. In general, although there are exceptions, an FAO will only serve one tour in an FAO-designated billet over the course of his career.

So What Do FAOs and RAOs Do?

With all of the time and money dedicated to building FAOs, what is the payoff for the Marine Corps? The Commandant's guidance is only general in nature when outlining the purpose of FAOs. Stated simply, the Marine Corps seeks to create Marines with regional and cultural expertise to support MAGTF operations worldwide. We can break down the possible contributions of an FAO into two spheres, the tactical and the strategic. In both cases, it is difficult to justify the FAO/RAO program due to the shortcomings inherent in the program, particularly when coupled with a lack of a clear definition of what an FAO is supposed to do at either level.

Minimal Tactical Returns

On a tactical level (MEU, regiment, and battalion), an FAO could theoretically serve a useful purpose during real-world contingency and theater security operations by providing background information and advice to a commander as he plans to commit forces into a region of the world that is culturally unique and most likely not well understood by the majority of Marines deploying to the area. However, this need might be better filled by interpreters and translators. During several deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, I observed an interesting relationship often develop between commanders and their interpreters. Unit and organizational commanders quickly came to rely on their best interpreters not only for excellent translation skills but also for their advice. For commanders dealing with Iraqi and/or Afghan security forces and local leaders, the interpreter often gave some of the most sage advice after the conversation was over due to unique native expertise and an understanding of the nuances of language that only a native speaker possesses. Very few FAOs can achieve the necessary level of language proficiency to serve as adequate



The attaché may be a better advisor for humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations like the Japanese tsunami. (Photo by GySgt J.L. Wright, Jr.)

interpreters despite language training. This is not to say that some FAOs don't have excellent language skills; some do, but this is usually a coincidence of an FAO having an ethnic background in the target country.

Since 2003 dozens of Marine combat and support units have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of these units underwent a predeployment training program that assisted the unit in understanding Iraqi and/or Afghan culture and language. Almost all of these units (below the regimental level) most likely deployed without any FAO attached to the unit and, in most cases, were successful working with Iraqi and/or Afghan security forces. The military does not operate in the diplomatic domain, and as such, military-to-military relations (in this case with the Iraqi and Afghan security forces) are usually easy to establish without having to worry too much about offending cultural norms. It can certainly be argued that a commander may reap additional benefits from having a Marine in his unit who has additional specialized training in a particular region or culture. But when we consider how much time and resources go into creating an FAO, the payoff seems marginal in comparison, especially in light of predeployment training programs that already pro-

vide cultural and regional awareness. At the tactical level, an interpreter who can often double as an ad hoc advisor probably provides more bang for the buck than any FAO. The concept of an FAO at the tactical level sounds good on the surface, but when we examine the real utility of the FAO, it is difficult to come up with any substantial contribution commensurate with the required investment.

Strategic Shortcomings

It would appear that an FAO at the strategic level (division, MEF, and higher) might be able to make a significant contribution compared to the tactical level. However, the training, while time and resource intensive, is unfortunately "a mile wide but an inch deep," leaving the FAO lacking in the requisite regional and policy expertise concerning his target country. The average FAO has most likely lived and travelled in his target country for about a year, which serves to give him a general knowledge about a specific country, but not much else. If a commander or policymaker wanted a true assessment of a specific country and the ramifications of a possible military or political action, an FAO with this amount of training would be hard-pressed to provide it. This became clear to me

when I was serving as an advisor to the 1st Iraqi Army Division in 2006. At that time the MEF had made development of the Iraqi security forces a priority. In order to provide the MEF commander with the most insightful information on Iraqi tribes and culture, a civilian regional expert was brought in from the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA). Whenever this analyst spoke during operational planning teams for the buildup of Iraqi forces it became very clear that he had the commanding general's ear. The general directed the most challenging and toughest questions to this civilian who was clearly the greatest expert on Iraqi affairs sitting in the room. As an FAO I realized that 2 years of classroom study and 1 year of area familiarization could not afford an FAO the depth of knowledge that this scholar possessed. I concluded then that the FAO program could never meet the goal of creating officers who could serve as strategic experts during military op-

erations. The depth of knowledge and expertise demonstrated by the CNA analyst can only be obtained from years of graduate-level work, something the FAO program cannot replicate and should not attempt to replicate unless the Marine Corps was to decide to create a professional cadre of scholar officers.

Where the Experts Are

The utility of the FAO program is even more questionable when we examine the cultural resources that already exist to serve military planners and leaders. Below are just some communities that exist around the world to assist combatant commands and Service component commands with regional and cultural expertise, and the list is certainly not all inclusive.

The academic community. CNA, RAND, Strategic Studies Institute, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies are just a few of the institutes

and think tanks that exist to directly or indirectly support U.S. policy and military operational efforts. There are also thousands of academic experts spread out all over the United States from academic institutions—experts who, in almost all cases, have multiple doctorate degrees and have travelled extensively in their target countries. In most cases, academic expertise is available to the Department of Defense via contracting or on a consulting basis and was used extensively during Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). As mentioned earlier, during OIF, the MEF commander had a political advisor or representative from the CNA who provided regional expertise on Iraqi tribal issues. The civilian experts assigned and deployed to support the MEF during OIF were unquestioned experts in their fields, and their opinions were highly regarded. Although expensive, a civilian expert trains himself and can be retained by

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the military only for as long as needed, allowing for flexibility as hotspots around the globe rise and diminish. The Marine Corps used to create Croatian FAOs. This was probably a reasonable goal in the 1990s when the Balkans flared up as a major region of instability, but most would agree now that there is very little utility in training and maintaining Croatian FAOs. Most important, a basically trained FAO cannot hope to compete against civilian experts who dedicate their lives to thoroughly mastering their regions of study.

The attaché community. An often overlooked source of regional expertise is the defense attaché community. Most attachés receive little formal training on their target countries, but they receive superb on-the-job training. Working in an Embassy provides an attaché with an incredible opportunity to acquire a vast amount of knowledge about the cultural and political nuances of a country in a very short period of time. An Embassy is chock full of political, economic, and cultural experts. All of the resident Embassy knowledge is available to the attaché if he is proactive. After only a few months on the job, an average attaché should be able to confidently brief the current cultural, military, and political forces that affect his specific country. The expertise of the attaché is available to combatant commanders, the joint staff, Service chiefs, and lower level commanders, such as MEU and battalion landing team commanders, if required, and they usually prove invaluable, especially when a crisis erupts. (The Georgian attachés were worth their weight in gold when Russia unexpectedly invaded Georgia in 2008.) Along with attaining regional expertise, all attachés receive language training, which puts some of them on par with FAOs when it comes to language proficiency. Again, the knowledge possessed by a seasoned attaché on post will make an FAO look like an amateur by comparison. Attachés are all over the world, and their expertise is readily available. Just because the Marine Corps may not have a Marine attaché resident in a certain country does not mean that it cannot take advantage of the expertise of the other Service attachés. Most

defense attaché offices understand that requests and requirements emerge from all Services, and they usually take a joint and shared perspective in the execution of their duties.

The intelligence community. In addition to academic experts and attachés, there is a large intelligence community of cultural analysts and subject matter experts who actually spend all of their time becoming experts on regional and local cultures. These cultural analysts are located throughout the intelligence community, to include the Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and even the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA), as well as other agencies and activities.

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These analysts and subject matter experts are devoted to maintaining expertise in their regional areas of interest and are often available to travel to units and organizations that request their support. MCIA actually produces very practical and useful country handbooks that provide Marines at every level with information equivalent to what a country expert might provide in a predeployment cultural awareness class.

The Need for True Expertise

The Department of Defense is probably at the very beginning of what will end up being years of austerity budgets. The Marine Corps has already sacrificed the expeditionary fighting vehicle and over the next few years will sacrifice a big chunk of its most precious commodity—personnel—due to budget cuts. The Marine Corps has always been at its very best when it concentrates on its core competency of winning battles from the sea. True, being an expert in amphibious operations requires being

an expert in many fields, with one of those fields being the ability to tap into regional and cultural expertise. The Marine Corps needs to maximize its access to *existing* regional and cultural expertise and stop pursuing the idea that it can create regional experts in an officer corps that is never able to truly develop such expertise and, even if it could, has a very short shelf life. The Marine Corps should instead develop a consultative relationship with academic think tanks and institutions and also leverage the defense attaché corps when critical regional and cultural expertise is required on short notice.

As mentioned before, my experience with the FAO program was incredibly rewarding for me personally, but less so for the Marine Corps. As the Marine attaché in Turkey, I worked for the DIA; I did not work for the Marine Corps. I represented the Marine Corps as part of my job, but over a 3-year period, I never heard much from Headquarters Marine Corps or any other Marine command. Although the Marine attaché job was very rewarding professionally, I was under no illusion that the Marine Corps, despite having trained me, was getting much for their investment. DIA, on the other hand, benefitted greatly from all of the FAO training the Marine Corps had paid for in my case. I did become an expert on Turkey eventually, but this was a result of my attaché experience, and not because of my 3 years in the FAO program. Within 6 months of working in the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, Turkey, I finally felt I had a baseline of expertise that might prove useful to commanders and policymakers if such expertise were to be called upon.

I write this article reluctantly as I put myself in the position of advocating for the termination of a program that has benefitted me tremendously, personally and professionally. But I would not be keeping good faith with the Marine Corps if I failed to illuminate the shortcomings and possible alternatives that might possibly make the Marine Corps more effective in the rapidly changing and diverse strategic and operational environment in which it will operate in the future.

