

Soccer Field of Dreams

Understanding the operating environment through the Marine Corps FAO

by Maj Marc Beaudreau

It will come as no surprise to most that in Brazil, and to a slightly lesser extent in the rest of the world, soccer is “kind of a big deal.” In March 2011, through the considerable efforts by the members of a Marine Helicopter Squadron 1 (HMX-1) detachment tasked with the Presidential support mission in Rio de Janeiro, somehow the sport of “futebol” became even bigger. What began as an operation in an alternate landing zone at Rio’s famous Clube de Flamengo became an event that would be embedded into the cultural memory of a nation, bridging the gap between the U.S. President’s visit with senior political leaders in the Brazilian capital of Brasilia and “the team of the people” at Rio de Janeiro’s most popular soccer club.

During a recent tour of Latin America to bolster relations with the Southern Hemisphere, President Barack Obama arrived first in Brazil and then subsequently traveled to Chile and El Salvador. Politically this event went a long way to signal a strengthening of U.S. political ties for the region. It was well covered by domestic and international media and was generally heralded as a success. The Marines of HMX-1 in various locales throughout Latin America supported the Presidential lift mission. In Rio de Janeiro, the main body of HMX-1 Marines arrived after an overnight flight and immediately began the assembly of the supporting helicopters, working all day in the sweltering Brazilian heat. Aircraft assembly, test flights, and rehearsal flights were conducted in very short order to prepare for the 2-day Presidential visit involving three different landing zones. The advance

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team of HMX-1 Marines landed on the ground 1 week prior to the main body and sought the assistance of a Marine foreign area officer (FAO) assigned to the area. All operations have an inherent unpredictability, and the HMX-1 advance team quickly surmised that unintended consequences could be quickly turned into unintended benefits when early planning and continuous assessment took cultural factors into account.¹ An operation in a friendly country does not presume unlimited access; on the contrary, even partner Western Hemisphere democracies can be filled with cultural challenges. The

Presidential lift mission in Rio de Janeiro provides a glimpse into what future forward engaged units augmented by Marine FAOs can accomplish in a very short amount of time.

The preparation of an FAO is a considerable investment for both the individual Marine officer and the Marine Corps. It is purposeful and designed to create an officer who can support Marine Corps Operating Forces. The FAO’s “MOS school” is essentially a triad of consecutive assignments that aims to create the necessary education and experience required to advise future decisionmakers. Over a 3-year pe-



HMX-1 Marines support Presidential travel in Latin America. (Photo by author.)

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riod, the FAO will have completed the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), the Defense Language Institute (DLI), and in-country training (ICT). Beginning in Monterey, CA, NPS is the formal education piece that establishes an instructive foundation in national security affairs in the form of a multidisciplinary master's degree. The degree itself comprises subjects ranging from comparative politics to civil-military relations theory and from economics to historical and contemporary issues specific to the FAO's assigned region. However, NPS is more than just a schoolhouse. It also provides for a reachback capability long after the Marine FAO graduates. In addition, professors who are experts in their respective fields and active in government policymaking teach the prospective FAOs. In this way the NPS education differs from some other civilian postgraduate degree programs where assistants working on their doctorates oftentimes teach master's degree candidates. The primary benefit of NPS lies in the fact that the Marine FAO has the opportunity to form a personal relationship that affords interaction with these mentors long after graduation. In addition, the research resources at NPS are something an FAO can continue to use throughout a career. NPS provides weekly updates and can be counted upon to fulfill requests for specific reports and articles pertinent to an FAO's region.

After receiving general and region-specific education at NPS, Marine FAOs

attend their target language courses at DLI. It is an intensive experience with a purpose that is mostly self-explanatory in that the FAO must be able to communicate in at least one of the primary languages of the region (e.g., in the Latin American region, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Haitian Creole are predominant). It is important for the reader to understand that neither DLI nor the FAO program seeks to create a Marine FAO who is an interpreter/translator. Rather, DLI gives the Marine officer the functional expertise to work in the region in order to gain the cultural acuity necessary for future operational support. After DLI, the FAO is assigned for 1 year in a country of the target region for ICT. The ICT experience is as varied as it is long—1 year, independent duty, far from Operating Forces support. But in general the FAO will increase his operational culture awareness by immersing in a population with an outside perspective of the American position in the world, both military and civilian. Clearly it is impossible to fully assimilate various regional cultures and subcultures by merely living and traveling in a target area for 1 year, as cultural learning is a lifelong process. However, the ICT encounter is relevant nonetheless.

The ICT experience is one that offers a multifaceted, region-focused study unavailable to most intelligence officers, at the very least from a “time to train” standpoint. Before entering into

a region for a given operation, Marine staffs conduct an intelligence preparation of the battlespace in support of the mission analysis portion of the Marine Corps Planning Process.² In accordance with this practice, the collection of raw data is continuously processed until it is deemed usable knowledge for operational decisionmaking. Properly leveraged early in this planning process, an FAO can help discern what analysts consider objective information against what is cultural reality. As Marines, especially when viewing a given culture from the outside, we tend to view events in concrete facts and timelines with our own military interpretation. Although Marine FAOs are by no means completely immune to this type of mindset, the FAO is trained to understand that cultural memory is different not only in objective interpretation but also in what the population wishes to be true, beyond outside observable realities.³ The reasons for this can vary, but a culture will interpret past, present, and future events as it suits its purposes. Regardless of the case, when a commander is assigned an area of operation and moves to conduct a predeployment site survey, there is a good chance that a Marine FAO will have already done considerable work in the region that can serve to jump start the IPB process. Certainly, even the late addition of an FAO to the mission gives the commander a potential problem-solver should unanticipated situations appear. In fact, one would be surprised what cultural barriers arise even in “friendly” countries. But more importantly, a Marine FAO involved early in the planning process is able to not only facilitate the avoidance of some of the potential pitfalls but also to influence the overall success of the mission by maximizing the cultural impact of what might have been thought of as a “routine” part of the assignment.

In this way the soccer field landing in Rio de Janeiro by HMX-1 was successful not only in the manner of logistics and transportation for the President, but because it was an operation that embedded itself into the collective cultural memory of the Brazilian people. The history of the Clube de Flamengo dates back to 1895, when



Helicopters utilized a popular soccer field as an alternate landing zone. (Photo by author.)

it began as a regatta club. It later formed a soccer team in 1911 when disgruntled players left another rival and popular Rio de Janeiro club. Since then, it has established itself as the most supported team in Brazil, claiming over 25 million fans in a country of roughly 190 million people and with over 400 professional clubs on the Brazilian Football Confederation's registry of teams. The various reasons why Flamengo is often referred to as "the team of the people" has been lost to history. Some say it began with the early team practicing on public lands instead of a private club field.⁴ Regardless, what began as an improbable and last minute alternate landing zone negotiated by an advance team of HMX-1 officers and a Marine FAO bridged the gap between the political elites and the general population. The President's visit to Brasilia to interact with the national-level Brazilian political leadership was almost certainly balanced by what was viewed by many in Brazil as support for their way of life. Moreover, beyond the media coverage on Brazilian sports networks, the "Flamengo landing" was also specifically reported on by sports networks in Spain, Italy, Portugal, Argentina, and Mexico, as players born of Flamengo teams also play professional soccer for teams in these countries.⁵ Beyond any future policy implications for the President's visit to Brasilia, ". . . when it comes to presidential diplomacy, symbolic gestures are as revealing as formal deals."⁶ As modern democracy continues to develop in Brazil, perhaps this gesture will in some small way convey the will of the people and manifest itself into closer political ties with the United States.

As a memorial to the historic landing in Rio de Janeiro, a photo exhibition of the U.S. President and the Marines of HMX-1 will reside in the newly constructed Clube de Flamengo museum, endearing the event to the vast majority of soccer fans who comprise a large percentage of people in Brazilian society and elsewhere.

[I]n the operational sense, history is not important because of what happened in the past. Rather, it is how people selectively remember the past,



Test flights were conducted in short order. (Photo by author)

and what meanings they choose to derive from the past.

This in itself is an important cultural impact of the mission.⁷ In this sense, what was a subordinate task by the Marines of HMX-1 to the larger mission of a Presidential visit to Brazil will reinforce the positive cultural memory of the event as a whole. In the near future, as the Marine Corps' role for regional engagement increases, a mutually beneficial relationship between forward engaged units and FAOs, such as the one described here, should be considered as a standing operating procedure, if possible. As a secondary MOS, the Marine FAO strives to be continually relevant in an area of expertise, both in the practice of foreign language and in current knowledge of the region, particularly while serving in non-FAO Operating Forces billets. The temporary assignment of FAOs to short duration regional engagement missions creates a supporting-supported relationship that can lend itself to mission success while furthering the payoff for the Marine Corps' considerable investment in the creation of the Marine FAO.

Notes

1. Credit must be extended to the Commanding Officer, HMX-1, and to the members of the White House liaison advance team for seamlessly integrating and welcoming a Marine FAO into their mission.

2. *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 5-1, Marine Corps Planning Process*, Appendix D, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington DC, 2001.

3. Salmoni, Barak, and Paula Holmes-Eber, *Operational Culture for the Warfighter: Principles and Applications*, Marine Corps University Press, Quantico, 2008, p. 218.

4. Blakeley, Robbie, "Flamengo Profile: Rio's Favorite Team," *The Rio Times*, accessed at <http://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-sports/flamengo-profile-rios-favorite-team>, 8 March 2011.

5. Globosporte.com, *Obama "Rubro-Negro" Ganha o Mundo*, translated by Marc Beaudreau, accessed at <http://globoesporte.globo.com/futebol/times/flamengo/noticia/2011/03/obama-rubro-negro-ganha-o-mundo.html>, 20 March 2011.

6. Pereira, Carlos, *Assessing Obama's Visit to Brazil: A New Framework for Relations with Latin America?*, Brookings Institution, accessed at http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0325_obama_brazil_relations_pereira.aspx, 25 March 2011.

7. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, p. 169.

