

The Marine FAO Program

PLU responds: championing the utility of the program

by LtCol A. Ché Bolden

As demonstrated in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan last year, the Marine Corps is aggressively finding ways to employ language, regional expertise, and culture (LREC) subject matter experts (SMEs) to maximize their contributions across the range of military operations in support of the MAGTF.

On 11 March 2011 at 1426 Japan Standard Time, a magnitude 9.0 megathrust earthquake occurred approximately 40 miles off the coast of Sendai, Japan. The resultant tsunami, with waves cresting over 140 feet, hit the coast of the Tōhoku region on the northeast portion of the island of Honshu, Japan. In the days and weeks that followed, it would be discovered that casualties accounted for more than 15,000 dead, 5,800 injured, and 3,400 missing. Countless tens of billions of dollars of damage and destruction lay in the aftermath of the combination earthquake-tsunami. The national infrastructure of Japan was hit hard, with roadways and electrical power severely damaged. The national security and public safety of Japan were called into question after concurrent Level 7 meltdowns of three nuclear power plants at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Facility as a direct result of the earthquake and tsunami.¹

During this time of national crisis, the Government of Japan turned to its trusted partner and ally, the United States, which stood ready to provide assistance and aid across the elements of national power. First to the scene was the U.S. military, as U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) stood up bilateral coordination centers (BCATs) in Tokyo and at Camp Sendai. 3d MEB, under Col Craig Q.

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Timberlake, moved forward to Camp Sendai and used a forward BCAT to help coordinate U.S. assistance to the Japan Self-Defense Force's Task Force Tōhoku. As Japan is a highly developed country, the Japanese remained firmly in the lead of recovery and reconstruction efforts, but strong participation by U.S. forces was required and welcomed. Col Timberlake had a plethora of Marines, soldiers, and foreign service officers ready at his disposal to provide whatever assistance they could to the people of Japan. Among the personnel were a number of Marine foreign area

officers (FAOs), linguistically adept and culturally savvy on Japanese issues, who were in various assignments across the Operating Forces and within the Marine Forces Japan area of responsibility. These Marines were made immediately available and flown in to support relief and recovery operations in order to provide a level of continuity and consistency with regard to communications, planning, and execution of combined efforts after the tsunami. Their roles varied, but each FAO made vital contributions toward a more efficient and coordinated effort.



FAOs are linguistically adept and culturally savvy. (Photo by Cpl Michael A. Bianco.)

Maj John Cherry was a member of the III MEF crisis action team but rapidly transitioned as a critical member of the forward command element (FCE) of the USFJ joint task force (JTF), subsequently named the Joint Support Force, that was stood up to deal with the disaster. Flying to Sendai on 12 March, Maj Cherry's language skills and staff experience were put to the test. As the first Japanese-speaking Marine on the scene, he was the initial pointman for the FCE as Col Timberlake coordinated with his Japanese counterpart, LTG Eiji Kimizuka,² Commanding General, Japanese Ground Self-Defense Forces (JGSDF) Northeastern Army and JTF Tōhoku.

LtCol James Kendall was a top-level school student at the National Institute for Defense Studies when he received the call to report to USFJ. He immediately deployed to Camp Sendai to help run the BCAT (Forward) and became an integral part of the U.S.-Japan relief operations as he helped bridge the gap between USFJ's FCE and the Japanese JTF Tōhoku. Collocated with the Japanese headquarters at Camp Sendai, his language skills and experience as a MAGTF officer proved key to advising Japanese officers of the capabilities of U.S. forces to best facilitate combined operations to help displaced persons and disaster victims. Due to the cultural sensitivities of dealing with the dead and wounded, LtCol Kendall's ability to associate his cultural understanding with Marine Corps operations, and communicate that effectively, proved to be indispensable.

Maj Giuseppe Stavale, assigned to the USFJ J-3 (Operations), was thrust into the role of coordinating actions of a BCAT and was hand selected to deploy to the devastated areas to support operations on the ground. Due to his well-known and proven ability to communicate and coordinate with Japanese officials, he was selected to support radiological experts from the U.S. Department of Energy to place special radiation sensors in multiple areas around the Fukushima Nuclear Power Facility. These missions were smooth and successful due to his coordination with JGSDF and local Japanese police



FAOs can establish a high level of trust with host-nation leaders. (Photo by LCpl Josh Cox.)

officials and provided essential data on the flow of airborne radiation contamination.

The efforts of the JTF, with tremendous support from III MEF units, contributed to fortifying the good will of the Japanese people as well as strengthening the bonds of professionalism between the JGSDF and the U.S. Marine Corps. That the Marine Corps was able to rapidly identify and deploy Marines with specific linguistic and cultural training in immediate support of the Japanese Government is the logical benefit of the Corps' efforts in the FAO and LREC programs. As a result, U.S. Forces Japan, via Marine Forces Japan, is now providing a permanent liaison officer, who is an FAO, to the JGSDF.

On Point

As the Nation's expeditionary force-in-readiness, the Marine Corps relies heavily on its human capital to accomplish all assigned missions, regardless of the climate or place. Recent emphasis on the importance of language and culture isn't as new as it appears. Lawrence of Arabia used it to great effect in the Middle East. Chesty Puller applied language and regional expertise during the Banana Wars in Nicaragua and Panama, as well as against the Japanese in the Pacific. Gen Robert H. Barrow and BGen Evans Carlson³ both wielded

LREC skills to develop keen insights on the Asia Pacific, and used their experiences to piece together significant clues with respect to the region and our adversaries there. Those Marines used the knowledge they gained to develop revolutionary concepts that would influence Marine Corps doctrine for generations. Furthermore, throughout their careers, they applied their developed ability to adapt and operate in foreign environments to operations well beyond their specific training and linguistics expertise. In the present day, those Marines would be classified as FAOs or regional affairs officers (RAOs).

The presence of LtCol Kendall, Maj Cherry, Maj Stavale, and four other Marine FAOs wasn't coincidental or pure happenstance. These Marines are trained Northeast Asian FAOs, secondary MOS 8243, SMEs in LREC, each with a deep network of personal and professional relationships in Japan and who were regionally assigned in support of Marine Corps equities. LtCol Lloyd Freeman's critique of the FAO program focuses on some inherent shortcomings. (See LtCol Lloyd Freeman, "Challenging the Marine FAO Program," pp. 67.). As well, it highlights some misperceptions pertaining to the Marine Corps' utilization of FAOs. It is a timely reminder of the value we place in the individual Marine to accomplish great

things divorced of conventional assets or material resources. In order to best support the National Security Strategy, the Marine Corps must capitalize on the human element when forward deployed and forward engaged. A decade of conflict has taught us that culture and regional expertise matter, and when combined with language ability, LREC skills are force multipliers in uncertain security environments.

What FAOs/RAOs Are

Today we leverage the expertise that FAOs/RAOs provide by placing them in diverse assignments, from combatant command staffs to Embassy country teams. However, the value of our FAOs/RAOs does not lie in the application of their skills when away from the Marine Corps; rather, it comes from the expertise they develop while training for and executing those assignments and their contributions to the development and employment of Marine units when they are serving in their primary MOSs in the Operating Forces. The Marine Corps expects that the skills developed through FAO training, acculturation, and utilization will likewise have utility in today's crisis response force, and experience bears this expectation out.

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It is in this way that our FAOs/RAOs make the greatest difference. We ask them to be our SMEs when it comes to language and culture. Academia will always have someone "smarter" or more informed on regional issues and more adept in linguistics skills, but they aren't Marines, and they won't be culturally and linguistically adept in *our* way of life—the application of military power, the planning associated with it, and the readiness to forward deploy to distant and austere locales. The process by which to obtain academic

responses and expertise or contracted support is lengthy and often involves overcoming academic constraints (that by involving themselves in policy they subsequently lose objectivity in the eyes of their community) and cannot be responsive enough to apply to "today's crisis response force, today." As the program continues to mature, our leaders will increasingly leverage FAOs/RAOs for planning insights on national and regional political systems, military capabilities, industrial capacities, and socioeconomic issues. The FAO/RAO program ensures that we maintain an acceptable level of "worldliness," while maintaining the fighting spirit and esprit that sets us apart from the rest.

Why FAOs/RAOs Are Important

Our FAOs and RAOs are SMEs whose professional competence is founded on a triad of skills: regional expertise, graduate-level education, and linguistic proficiency. Coupled with their abilities as MAGTF officers, we employ them in foreign environs immediately. The proficiency and retention of those skills is relevant to every Operating Forces tour of duty. We benefit from their language and cultural expertise, as well as their experiences gained

through foreign travel and education, to enhance our capabilities as a Service. The key, as LtCol Freeman points out, is to ensure that we capitalize on their unique skill sets.

His comments highlight the significance of a systematic utilization plan for these professionals. Over the last decade, International Affairs Branch (PLU-8) has coordinated hand in glove with Manpower Management Division to ensure that our Marines are assigned to the right job, in the right place, at the right time. This coordination is paying

off. Marines who are in the program have continued to develop as MAGTF officers, recognized for making significant contributions to the Corps across the range of military operations and individual activities. As a result, promotion rates for FAOs/RAOs are above the Operating Forces average. PLU-8 has cognizance over all international affairs programs:

- FAO/RAO.
- Personnel Exchange Program.
- Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program.
- Foreign area SNCO (FAS)/Regional affairs SNCO (RAS) (nascent capability).

In accordance with the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* task to "Institutionalize RAO/FAO Program," the Commandant has directed Plans, Policies, and Operations Department (PP&O) to aggressively address any and all aspects of the Marine Corps that are touched by FAOs and RAOs. PLU-8 exists for the sole purpose of administering all things pertaining to the international affairs programs and is fully engaged. As a result, PLU-8 has accomplished the following:

- Validated all FAO/RAO coded billets across the Marine Corps and joint force in an effort to better align those billets with Marine Corps equities in the current and future security environment. This is a recurring process and will continue to refine the structure and placement of the program support to the Operating Forces.
- Created a pilot program that is geared to getting language and culture down to the lowest level supportable and capitalizes on the depth of talent we have in our enlisted ranks. The FAS/RAS beta test is underway and will provide a valuable baseline upon which to develop future concepts of employment to best support the MAGTF commander. The significance of this initiative cannot be overstated. It will get the LREC skills to the appropriate user at the tactical level.
- Initiated a complete review and realignment of the Personnel Exchange Program in order to provide engagement opportunities more in



Support coordination includes periodic progress review meetings. (Photo by Capt Caleb D. Eames.)

line with the future security environment. It will help the Marine Corps leverage familiar relationships with allies and coalition partners for years to come.

- Contracted an independent study to evaluate the health of the FAO/RAO community. That study was completed in November 2011 and reported that the program was flourishing, with promotion rates equal to or above the Operating Forces average and billet assignments that enhanced FAO/RAO utilization and return on investment.

- Is working with Director of Intelligence to evaluate current Marine attaché billets. Future efforts will focus on increasing the number of defense attaché/senior defense official billets for lieutenant colonel, colonel, and brigadier general.

- In coordination with the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, is seeking to validate and grow the number of security cooperation officer billets within country teams around the globe. These officers are enablers for any security cooperation initiative and engagement.

These efforts are monumental and equate to a fundamental shift in our approach to LREC competencies. There is still work to be done.

Where We Are Going

So why should the Marine Corps continue to assess, train, and employ LREC SMEs? During the third party assessment of the FAO/RAO program, 63 percent of FAOs responded they “sometimes” or “more frequently” utilize their regional training outside an FAO billet.⁴ The program is paying off, but the Operating Forces require more direct access to Marines of this professional competence, which is why we’re developing the FAS/RAS program. Promotion analysis indicates that active duty, in-zone FAOs/RAOs fair similar to or better than their non-FAO/RAO counterparts in promotion rates to major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel, but have not reached steady state. In order to enhance the competitiveness of these officers, we’re expanding the number of operational billets that leverage LREC competency. To that effect, careful selection of qualified Marines to participate in this program is a Service-wide effort, and the Commandant’s professional military education boards will help to enforce a high standard for selection and participation in the programs.

These initiatives are steadily creating the conditions to leverage these capabilities in the Operating Forces, but it is incumbent on us to employ these Marines as optimally as possible. As a Service, we must look with an unbiased eye at the

skill sets these Marines provide. The future security environment is uncertain. The Marine Corps is leading the way as the Nation establishes strategic presence through security cooperation efforts. Marines with an LREC background are adequately armed and trained with the skill sets necessary to integrate the MAGTF into these efforts.

Notes

1. Congressional Research Service document, *Japan’s 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami: Economic Effects and Implications for the United States*, 6 April 2011.

2. Recently promoted to general, Kimizuka is now the Chief of Staff, JGSDF. His experiences with Marine FAOs, and the Marine Corps as a whole, established an ally who is now part of the national leadership of Japan.

3. Gen Robert H. Barrow, 27th Commandant of the Marine Corps, was part of the Sino-American Cooperative Organization that trained and equipped Chinese guerrillas during Japanese occupation of central China. BGen Evans Carlson leveraged his Chinese experience, and his observations of Chinese military practice, as a foundation to form Carlson’s Raiders, which laid the foundation of the modern rifle squad. Additionally, while not referenced in the article, LtCol Earl “Pete” Ellis’ experiences as a company commander in the Philippines heavily influenced his penning of *Operations Plan 712: Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia*, which was instrumental to U.S. amphibious operations in the Western Pacific.

4. Marine Corps Studies Program Support, Final Report, *The Foreign Area Officer (FAO)/Regional Affairs Officer (RAO) Requirement Study*, prepared for Operational Analysis Division, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, by Northrup Grumman Information Systems, 20 September 2011, pp. 4–7.

