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8 Apr 13

From: Captain Jeffrey D. Randall 1276525154/0802
To: International Affairs Program Coordinator, International Affairs Branch
(PLU-8)

Subj: AFTER ACTION REPORT FOR CAPTAIN JEFFREY D. RANDALL
1276525154/0802 LANGUAGE SUSTAINMENT TRAINING TO BOQUETE, PANAMA FROM 8
MARCH 2013 TO 31 MARCH 2013

1. Background: My Foreign Area Officer (FAO) experience was conducted as a civilian after studying as an exchange student at the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo de Argentina. In November 2012, I submitted an Experience Track Foreign Area Officer (FAO) (LATAM: 8241) to the 1st Quarter 2013 selection board. While awaiting the board results, I found the Language Sustainment Training (LST) information paper on the International Affairs Programs (IAP) website. Upon reading the LST information paper, I contacted IAP and requested information on my selection for FAO and advice on the viability of participating in LST. I was subsequently notified told that I had been selected by the board and was given permission to generate an LST proposal. As a Marine I had never traveled overseas on official government business other than on deployment. Before LST, I was unfamiliar with the Foreign Clearance Guidelines (FCG), had never personally utilized the Defense Travel System (DTS), or submitted requests through the Aircraft and Personnel Automated Clearance System (APACS). As such, my approach was that of a "novice" with regard to Foreign Area Officer training, and I executed LST without any of the background administrative knowledge that more experienced FAOs likely possess due to In-Country Training experience and/or prior billets. Furthermore, I conducted LST within 35 days of learning about the program, which I planned and executed during a Permanent Change of Station move from overseas to the continental United States (CONUS).

2. Topic: Making the decision to participate in Language Sustainment Training (LST) and lead time allocation for LST planning.

Discussion: Foreign Clearance Guidelines (FCG), Official/Diplomatic Passport Application, and visas all present significant obstacles for a new FAO attempting to organize and participate in short-term LST.

Recommendation: FAOs must conduct thorough research on each country's entrance requirements for official government within their Area of Responsibility (AOR) **BEFORE** submitting a LST request to IAP. Ideally, I would recommend that IAP generate some sort of flow-chart or decision matrix to aid new FAOs in their decision-making process on whether LST is viable for their particular situation and personal passport/visa status. Taking my own advice, I would probably not attempt to plan and conduct LST again with only a 35 day lead time while in the middle of an overseas PCS move. I would discourage a FAO who was attempting to conduct LST with less than 45 days of lead time unless he had significant experience conducting official travel and already possesses a valid diplomatic/official passport with appropriate visa(s) (if required). That being said, I found that short-fuse planning for LST can be executed successfully to a no-visa required study site.

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3. Topic: Language Sustainment Training cost estimates and the Defense Travel System

Discussion: To generate my initial cost estimate for language sustainment training, I utilized normal civilian websites and travel guides. When my proposal was approved utilizing estimates predicated on those sources, I began making reservations on the Defense Travel System (DTS). On DTS I found that the prices were exceptionally more expensive than those promulgated on civilian travel and airlines websites. These cost increases required me to adjust my cost estimates to reflect DTS quotes and re-submit for approval through my chain of command and PLU-8 for the additional funds. I found this to be frustrating as I tried to minimize costs on my estimate while simultaneously allowing enough room for DTS price differences and the fluctuating prices within a developing country.

Recommendation: On the information worksheet that is promulgated for Defense Language Sustainment training, I recommend that guidance be included to utilize DTS to generate cost estimates. This can be done by creating 'ghost orders' and going through the whole process of creating the trip. The costs generated on the 'ghost orders' will likely be the most accurate estimates the FAO will be able to create, which can then be used as the FAO's LST budge proposal. Following approval/denial the FAO can later be deleted the DTS orders or adjust them to reflect the approved training. The training sample template provided by IAP should further include the caveat that should any updated cost estimate go over those already proposed, applicants will have to resubmit their LST proposal for the additional funds. Another recommendation on the information paper would be to categorize what PLU-8 and GTCC each pay for based on their funding purpose, and allow the FAO to structure their program proposals accordingly. Following this method, IAP just approves/modifies/denies the proposal instead of doing the extra work of breaking down the costs themselves after receiving the training porposal. Immersion programs that include more than just school tuition (i.e. lodging, meals etc.) should be submitted on the proposal as a consolidated "Immersion Program" or "XXXXXX School Tuition" with other, non-lesson cost items listed in parentheses or margins so that the approver ensure there is no 'double-dipping' of 'meals and incidentals' funding.

4. Topic: Selection of Panama within the Latin America AOR as my LST site

Discussion: I researched the following countries' FCG for U.S. government official entry and travel: Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. The countries that had the least restrictive entry requirements AND the least restrictive U.S. government (embassy and combatant command) requirements for entry/travel were Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Once I found those countries that had customs and embassy regulations that were conducive to LST, I made the decision to study in Panama, largely because of its strategic importance and my own personal interest. I also concurrently planned for LST in Mexico if the Panama request were to fail in receiving APACS approval. For comparison purposes, at the time of my training, an APACS request for travel to Mexico required 15 days Combatant Command lead time (NORTHCOM). All of SOUTHCOM AOR required 30 days APACS request leave time. I submitted an APACS request for Panama on 4 February 2013 (SOUTHCOM AOR). I received approval on 28 February 2013. I submitted an APACS to Mexico on 26 February 2013 when I became concerned my Panama trip would be not be approved in time. I received approval on 27 February 2013. NORTHCOM was extremely responsive to my request

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and provided helpful commentary to improve the viability of my request for approval. SOUTHCOM did not. This should be a strong takeaway for LATAM FAOs that may like to conduct LST but are worried about the timeline and approval(s) turnaround; my experience showed that Mexico may be a viable option for short turnaround training. In addition to the responsiveness, NORTHCOM did not require as many training course completions as did SOUTHCOM (i.e. SERE 100.1, Human Trafficking, etc.). My APACS request to Panama required multiple phone calls and emails both to SOUTHCOM and the U.S. embassy in Panama before it was approved.

Recommendation: FAOs should submit an APACS request as soon as the country is decided upon. FAOs could also submit multiple APACS requests for travel to several countries in their AOR as contingency plans. APACS requests can be modified with amplifying details. Submit early and modify later if necessary so that the combatant command and embassy timelines can be met. For LATAM FAOs who do not have time to secure visas to other countries, Central America and Mexico proved to be the most viable options for LST.

5. Topic: Panama and the city of Boquete as an immersion site

Discussion: Travel to and within Panama proved relatively simple once all of travel planning was complete. The country enjoys an enviable economic position within the developing nations of Latin America. I found personal security in Panama to be better than Argentina, Chile and Mexico. Boquete in particular proved extremely safe. I selected Boquete as a study site because of its small size, easy access to the country's interior and Costa Rican border, and economic importance in Panama's most quickly-developing region. In addition to the above-mentioned attributes, over the last ten years, the Chiriqui province has developed five small communities of European and American retirees and developed an extensive ecotourism infrastructure. The associated influx of foreigners resulting from these two phenomena has somewhat detracted from the 'authenticity' of Boquete as a Panamanian city. However, there is no doubt that the high level of security found in the city can at least be partially attributed to tourism and income from the nearby retiree communities. Boquete was originally designed by Swiss city planners and consists of an easily navigable grid of approximately 5 square miles. The city allows access to the nearby Parque Internacional de Amistad, which is a large international park, spanning from Northeast Panama to Southeast Costa Rica. The geographic position, ease of travel to and from, and economic importance makes Boquete an interesting and easy place to conduct language training. However the large number of tourists and foreign retirees detracts from its capacity to provide a completely immersive environment.

Recommendation: If a FAO were to select Panama as a LST site, I would recommend he/she study in Panama City and include Boquete as a weekend trip. Panama City provides deeper and more extensive cultural and travel experiences than Boquete. However, Boquete provided a more than adequate language learning environment, and I was able to develop relationships with Panamanians that would have likely been less feasible in a large city environment like Panama City. Though the quantity of English speakers is higher in Panama than in Argentina or Chile where I conducted the majority of my Experience Track FAO experience, Panama still facilitated an immersive language training environment. Panamanians speak a highly intelligible form of Spanish, free of the colloquialisms that plague Chilean and Argentine Spanish. Additionally, I believe the strategic importance of Panama necessitates its familiarization by Latin American FAOs. The ease of travel and entrance requirements, geographic proximity to the United States,

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strategic importance, and well-developed infrastructure make Panama an extremely viable LST site. I recommend the country continue to be utilized for LST.

6. Topic: Weekend travel

Discussion: While in Panama City I visited Casco Viejo, the original settlement of Panama City, as well as the city's financial district, the Panama Canal and commercial centers. While in Boquete I traveled to the nearby city of David, the third largest city in Panama, to visit the 'Feria Internacional de

Centroamerica' the largest international festival in Central America. The feria included vendors, businesses and customers from across Central and South America. During my second weekend, I visited the indigenous communities of Ngobe and Embera Indians that flank Boquete.

Recommendation: FAOs conducting LST in Panama should take full advantage of the cultural opportunities throughout the country during their off-time from language training.

7. Topic: HABLAYA Spanish School

Discussion: HABLAYA is a constituent of the 'Instituto Cervantes', which is a worldwide, non-profit organization initiated by the Spanish government to promote the learning of Spanish as a second language. As a part of 'Instituto Cervantes' HABLAYA followed specific methodology promulgated by the institute, which I found to be superior to my prior university studies. After executing a placement test, I had six hours of private Spanish instruction five days a week for two weeks, and five hours a day for three days during my last week, totaling 75 hours of private instruction. HABLAYA provided an immersive Spanish language experience which included one airport transfer, homestay, and private instruction. Most importantly, I found the school to be extremely prompt and attentive in making the necessary reservations and providing logistics to facilitate my studies. While coordinating my trip, I rarely had to wait more than 12 hours on the school for a reply or correspondence on a question or inquiry. In addition to private lessons, the school facilitated my request to focus on developing my Spanish conversation skills. As such, more than 80% of my instruction was focused on revamping my speaking skills and refining my pronunciation. Throughout the classes my progress was somewhat laborious, as it had been over six years since maintaining a prolonged conversation in Spanish. However, there is no doubt that my capacity to communicate greatly increased from the 75 hours of practice and exposure. The instructors at HABLAYA maintained an effective management of my efforts to ensure that we discussed and evaluated a whole spectrum of issues and themes. The instructors were always well-prepared, punctual, and patient. The school sought out ways to cater to my specific needs, and demonstrated uncommon levels of customer service and organization.

Recommendation: I highly recommend that if a Latin America FAO participates in LST, they seek out a Spanish language school accredited by the 'Instituto Cervantes' to benefit from the superior teaching methodology that is a component of accreditation. HABLAYA presents a well-organized, effective option for Spanish language training in Boquete, Panama.

8. Point of contact. I can be contacted by phone or e-mail at (979) 373-6572, or jeffrey.randall@marquette.edu.