Twelve Cups of Tea
A more effective approach to language, regional, and cultural training
by Capt Mike Chapman

Hassaniya is difficult. Though it can be transcribed in Arabic, it is technically an unwritten language made up of a variety of tongues—French, Berber, Wolof, Soninke, and Pulaar for example—in addition to the traditional Arabic that makes up the majority of the vocabulary. It sounds like a guttural, almost barbaric, form of modern standard Arabic, though linguists will agree that Arabic itself is already an extremely guttural language. This trait causes Hassaniya speakers to often embody the tone of the language unknowingly, sometimes sounding aggressive or demeaning to non-Arabic speakers when describing something as harmless as the weather. Often foreign non-verbal cues are more difficult to interpret than foreign languages.

During our three months of language instruction, days began at 0500—often earlier—with prayer call. Although I did not participate in prayer, I often joined my hosts in washing my face and hands during their ablutions simply because the water was cool and refreshing. This sometimes invited unwanted invitations to convert to Islam. It was not a patronizing offer, as I initially assumed—they were simply offering the opportunity for the sake of inclusion.

Breakfast was simple. Normally we ate some bread and washed it down with zrig, which was essentially chilled camel milk mixed with water. On rare occasions, we feasted on large cups of couscous mixed with fresh-squeezed cow milk. The meal always ended with three, boiling-hot cups of sugary mint tea while sitting barefoot beneath their large, traditional khatima, or nomadic tent. Then, with a grumbling stomach and sometimes a burnt tongue, I began my twenty-minute walk to my language instructor’s home for eight hours of class.

Our instructor did not speak English, and we did not speak Hassaniya. However, we all spoke French. As a result, we learned Hassaniya in French and later converted the vocabulary to English as needed, causing an interesting cycle of translation throughout the day and a major headache at night. We paused for tea and bread once mid-morning and once mid-afternoon. This, on top of the tea traditionally served after dinner, lead to the consumption of about twelve cups per day during training and throughout our service, as sharing a pot of tea was the local equivalent of sitting down for a beer in America. We could not develop relationships, build rapport, or continue learning the language without it.

Dinner generally consisted of a starch (rice or couscous), a protein (fish or meat), and a small assortment of cooked vegetables, if available. We ate with our hands from a communal bowl. It took time to learn to eat oily rice without utensils—squeezing just enough oil out of the rice to form a cohesive, edible ball can be challenging. We were each informally assigned the equivalent of a pizza slice of real-estate within the circular bowl. Anything within that space was acceptable to eat, but anything beyond was not. This daily exercise in communal eating taught the simple yet essential values of generosity, patience, and gratitude while publicly displaying the evils of selfishness and greed.
Although we sat through hours of language and cultural instruction, the most important lessons were learned outside the sweaty classroom—on the street, in the market, and under the khaima. We learned when to make eye contact, and more importantly, when not to make eye contact; how to casually hold hands with other men as a true sign of friendship and brotherhood; the true meaning, and importance, of a thorough greeting; the prominence of God’s will in our counterparts’ lives; the supremacy of saving face; how Islam can shape perceptions, beliefs, and life in rural Muslim communities; the art of haggling; and living life without timelines.

This was not a robust pre-deployment training package tailored at developing “culturally proficient operators” nor a high-speed, contractor-led course designed to “develop practical knowledge of belief systems” as a culture capacity.” There were no role players, interpreters, MOJT facilities, online modules, or PowerPoint presentations. Instead, this was a low-budget, locally-taught language and cultural immersion training program for Peace Corps volunteers assigned to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Language, regional, and cultural classes were taught by local Mauritanians. Each trainee lived with a Mauritanian family in a local town or village to reinforce classroom instruction. The only gear issued was Balk to give our instructor and a water filter for our homestay. The system worked.

The Marine Corps is not the Peace Corps, though, nor should it be. The development of hardened warfighters requires a slightly different focus than the development of idealistic English education volunteers. Yet, when it comes to developing the requisite cross-cultural skills to interact effectively with foreign partners and civilian populations, such as language ability and knowledge of local belief systems, the Marine Corps could learn from organizations that treat these skillsets as mission essential tasks.

Currently, Marine Corps language, regional expertise, and cultural (LREC) skill sets are developed and managed through several related initiatives. First, the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) develops basic language and operational culture curricula and delivers the instruction for pre-deployment (and in-deployment) training. CAOCL also administers the Regional, Culture, and Language Familiarization (RCLF) Program for the total force, consisting of online coursework on regional/cultural knowledge and basic language training. Second, the International Affairs Program (IAP) administers specialized programs such as Foreign Area Officer/SNCO (FAO/FAS), Regional Area Officer/SNCO (RAO/RAS), and Personnel Exchange Program, (PEP). Other opportunities, such as defense attaches and Marine liaisons (MLNOs) are also relevant but managed through other offices. These highly competitive programs require a combination of proven language ability, articulated regional knowledge, advanced education, and in-country training—among other requirements.

Lastly, the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group, in addition to its primary duties, runs the Marine Advisor Course and supports a wide variety of LREC training for units conducting security cooperation and advising missions overseas. Starring in fiscal year 2019 (FY19), Marines who graduate from the Marine Advisor Course and complete RCLF 101 will be eligible for the Foreign Security Force Advisor FMOS, while Marines who complete a six-month advisor tour will now be eligible for the Advanced Security Force Advisor FMOS. Other programs, such as the Defense Language Proficiency Bonus and Language Sustainment Funding, are also available.

While these efforts are encouraging responses to the growing (and historic) evidence that cultural awareness matters, particularly when conducting irregular warfare, there is room for improvement. The RCLF program amounts to the equivalent of “three weeks of training and education devoted to cultural learning over a twenty-year career,” none of which involves interaction with a human. Cultural immersion opportunities, such as those offered through the IAP, defense attaches, and MLNO programs, are few and far between. For example, in Africa there are no PEP billets, only one MLNO, just eight Marines in defense attaché offices, and only three assigned to offices of security cooperation. These opportunities are also offered relatively late in a Marine’s career, allowing little chance of benefit at the tactical level in forward deployed units. While the FY19 Foreign Security Force (FSF) Advisor/Advanced FSF Advisor FMOS screening process is certainly an improvement, it only verifies that a Marine graduated from a one-month course (with a nearly 100 percent graduation rate) and deployed on an advisor mission; there is no screening process to ensure said Marine should have been chosen as an advisor in the first place. Worse, the Marine Corps still fails to ensure that Marines who possess unique LREC skillsets are rewarded (i.e., retained and promoted) for applying their skill sets outside of their primary MOS.

In fact, sometimes commands assign “building partner capacity” (BPC) billets to Marines that the “command can do without,” preferring that the most qualified Marines remain engaged with duties aligned with their primary MOS for proper career progression.

These trends are unfortunate. Knowledge of partner nation, local civilian, and enemy belief systems that are “relevant to operational planning and decision making” have a major impact on a unit’s ability to operate in a dynamic, cross-cultural environment. Gaining a perspective on how host-nation partners, local civilians, and enemy forces interpret “the substance and meaning of phenomena and human activity” is an invaluable asset when planning for and reacting to rapidly changing situations overseas. It gives planners additional insight to proactively anticipate actions and reactions rather than passively responding to ambiguous, confusing circumstances. It enables Marines to

* A belief is a certainty, learned through inherited group experiences and practices, about the substance and meaning of phenomena and human activity... beliefs influence the way people perceive their world, resulting in a specific worldview.
adjust their singular, biased worldview to the local context. It reduces friction when partnering with local personnel and improves interoperability. It assists in the collection, interpretation, and dissemination of relevant intelligence. Most importantly, it enables Marines to accurately define and update the operational environment on a continuous basis.

However, there is a fine line between a genuine understanding of belief systems gained through tangible experience and immersion, and the more “practical” knowledge one might receive during pre-deployment training. The former is a force multiplier at the tactical, operational, and even strategic level. Marines with this level of knowledge can have enduring effects on their subordinates, peers, and superiors before, during and after mobilizations, but the skillset requires extended immersion. The latter is just another episodic PowerPoint brief or practical application exercise during a pre-deployment package that may or may not actually impact a Marine’s performance in-country. It is a “nice to have,” and certainly better than nothing at all, but not necessarily a “need to have.” The Marine Corps should increase funding and opportunities for immersion, offer them earlier to qualifi-

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**MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest**

**Boldness earns rewards...**

The annual MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest invites articles that challenge conventional wisdom by proposing change to a current Marine Corps directive, policy, custom, or practice. To qualify, entries must propose and argue for a new and better way of “doing business” in the Marine Corps. Authors must have strength in their convictions and be prepared for criticism from those who would defend the status quo. That is why the prizes are called Boldness and Daring Awards.

Prizes include $3,000 and an engraved plaque for first place, $1,500 and an engraved plaque for second place, and $500 for honorable mention. All entries are eligible for publication.

*Instructions*

The contest is open to all Marines on active duty and to members of the Marine Corps Reserve. Electronically submitted entries are preferred. Attach the entry as a file and send to gazette@mca-marines.org. A cover page should be included, identifying the manuscript as a Chase Prize Essay Contest entry and including the title of the essay and the author’s name. Repeat the title on the first page, but the author’s name should not appear anywhere but on the cover page. Manuscripts are accepted, but please include a disk in Microsoft Word format with the manuscript. The Gazette Editorial Advisory Panel will judge the contest in June and notify all entrants as to the outcome shortly thereafter. Multiple entries are allowed; however, only one entry will receive an award.

**Deadline: 30 April**

Send to: gazette@mca-marines.org
Mail entries to: Marine Corps Gazette, Box 1775, Quantico, VA 22134

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fied small unit leaders, and reward those Marines who take advantage of these opportunities and apply them overseas. Realistically, cost and time will prohibit most of the Marines destined for BPC missions from reaching a full level of cultural proficiency. However, most missions and billets do not require in-depth cultural proficiency to achieve success. Any Marine who has conducted a BPC mission can attest to the fact that once in-country, certain Marines or Sailors quickly establish themselves as unique enablers who “lead their peers and subordinates to break inhibitions and immerse themselves in the culture and experience that surrounds them. They humanize us and make us approachable to our allies.” Their enthusiasm for the mission and curiosity about the partner nation serves as a force multiplier within the unit, convincing some of their otherwise conservative peers to participate fully in what is often the main effort and center of gravity in irregular warfare: building relationships. They convince their peers to eat the exotic foods, participate in odd social customs, and step out of their comfort zones. In doing so, they are able to learn as much about local beliefs and culture in a few days with their local counterparts as they could with weeks of presentations in Camp Lejeune. Their ability to do so stems from their innate maturity, demeanor, open-mindedness, tolerance, patience, flexibility, and sense of humor, not because they memorized a CAOCL customs and etiquette smart card or learned to say “thank you” in Swahili. Without these intrinsic, often unteachable characteristics, most Marines (and most units) will struggle to build partner capacity in complex environments overseas. From a resource perspective for the total force, more time and effort should be spent on proactively screening for Marines with this personality profile (talent management) prior to investing additional resources in superficial cultural briefs/modules (training).

As mentioned, the Marine Corps implemented significant changes in recent years to address these issues; however, more can be done as outlined in the Marine Corps Operating Concept. Specifically, the Marine Corps should consider the following recommendations.

Increase Opportunities for Immersion

Developing Marines with deep, first-hand knowledge of foreign cultures and belief systems—and deploying them with units on relevant missions overseas—is a far greater force multiplier to BPC missions than a pre-deployment CAOCL brief or additional online RCLF module. Rather than relying on episodic, external expertise aimed at building “practical” knowledge of foreign cultures and belief systems prior to a deployment, the Marine Corps should focus resources on developing more of its most valuable asset—its Marines—with the internal, enduring ability to serve as cultural and linguistic enablers and force multipliers within their units on relevant missions. This includes not only FAO/Rao/FAS/RAS funding and opportunities, but also increasing the number of PEP, MLNO, and attaché billets available in critical regions and countries. More importantly, this should include the development of cultural immersion training venues in collaboration with partner nations throughout the world. While this level of immersion is not needed for every billet on every mission, it should be required for key staff on BPC missions, such as the OIC/SNOIC on mobile training teams and advisor rotations, portions of the MEU staff (specific to destination regions), or unit leaders within companies that go ashore for exercises.

Offer Immersion Opportunities Earlier

Currently, FAO/Rao eligibility begins with at least three years of time in service and the rank of first lieutenant, whereas FAS/RAS eligibility requires an even longer time in service. While this makes sense for operational- and strategic-level engagement and impact, it achieves little at the tactical level in forward deployed units. If the Marine Corps wants to truly ensure that relevant cultural knowledge is developed and distributed within forward deployed units, it needs to offer opportunities for those junior officer and NCO small unit leaders who possess the requisite experience and/or potential to employ these skills in a professional manner at the squad and platoon level. The depth and duration of training could be tailored to the audience; in-country training could be shortened, language requirements loosened, or educational requirements varied as needed, similar to the differences between FAO/FAS and RAo/RAS requirements. One recent recommendation suggested that all company-sized units could have at least three to four qualified IAP tactical Marine leaders with specific regional and language specialties “to guide proactive unit cultural awareness training in preparation for future fights.” This will be a proactive, systematic method for the Marine Corps to develop and enable “strategic corporals” within every platoon and company. These skillsets are as important (if not more) at the small unit level as in staff and Embassy settings—the Marine Corps needs to acknowledge this trend and adjust its policies accordingly.

Screen Personnel for BPC Missions

Most missions or billets will not require a full level of cultural proficiency. Having an open, curious, respectful, and flexible personality will suffice for most Marines conducting BPC missions, but the Marine Corps needs to improve its processes at identifying and screening for these traits. While the revised FSP advisor and Advanced FSP advisor MOS screening process is a step in the right direction, more can be (and should be) done at the battalion level and below. Marine Corps databases simply are not capable of identifying the intangible qualities needed for successful navigation of the “human dynamics” of a BPC mission. Additionally, the FSP advisor screening process excludes Marines who exhibit all of the qualities of an effective advisor, but simply have not completed the MAC or an actual advisor tour. Additional steps at the battalion level and below must be taken to verify force-level filters and fill in the inevitable gaps. For example, officers in charge should be required to conduct additional screening, ideally in-person panel interviews, in order to build their
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Reward Cultural Expertise

Despite recent efforts, becoming a multi-lingual, culturally astute Marine and actively seeking billets in which those skills apply is still treated (and more importantly viewed) as a career-killer within the Marine Corps. As it stands now, pursuing FMOS—credibility, such as FAO/RAO utilization tours and FSE advisor billets—over primary MOS experience makes Marines less competitive for promotion. Without any sort of practical incentive, very few Marines will risk promotion and career prospects to develop LREC skills. If the Marine Corps truly wants to develop “culturally proficient operators,” the system needs to reward (or avoid punishing at a minimum) those Marines who sacrifice company command or platoon sergeant opportunities to learn critical languages or lead embedded training teams within foreign security forces. This means creating career incentives, progressions, and roadmaps similar to those of primary MOSs that will encourage these unique Marines to identify themselves, develop and utilize their skillsets, and promote them based on their performance on (not just completion of) BPC-related missions.

The Peace Corps has three primary goals: to “help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women,” to “promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served,” and to “promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.” In a lot of ways, these goals align with those of military BPC missions. And the third goal, in particular, addresses a key component of this essay topic. Learning to eat oily rice by hand or drink twelve cups of tea per day probably will not be listed as a terminal learning objective in future Marine Corps training manuals, but that is not the point. The Peace Corps understands this. Perhaps the Marine Corps should take note.

Notes

7. Ibid.