



(U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Christine Jones)

Lt. Col. Burton Shields, commander of 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 5th Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, and his translator conduct a key leader engagement 31 October 2009 in Karezgay, Afghanistan. The objective of the meeting was to assure town elders of continued U.S. military and Afghan National Police support in the fight against the Taliban. Shields was deployed to Forward Operating Base Wolverine in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, to conduct counterinsurgency operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

# Army Translator and Interpreter Companies A Wasted Resource

Capt. Jessica L. Cook, U.S. Army

**I**n February of 2003, a shortfall in the U.S. military's ability to communicate in languages other than English caused senior military leaders to reevaluate the command language program.<sup>1</sup> Most U.S. operators in the Middle East could not communicate with the populations they hoped to influence because

few spoke any of the languages and dialects native to the region. Moreover, the language deficit hindered operations and the ability of U.S. military personnel to form deep and lasting relationships with friends and allies from countries such as Jordan, Qatar, and the Sultanate of Oman.

Potential solutions for overcoming the military language barrier were to teach soldiers the languages needed or to hire native speakers and train them as soldiers. Neither solution would be quick or easy; both would have their merits and pitfalls. However, because language is intricately tied to culture—both best taught through immersion and experience—and nonnative speakers need many years of study to reach fluency in the languages and cultures they study, the Army's preferred solution was to enlist bilingual (or multilingual) native speakers of other languages to train as soldiers, translators, interpreters, and cultural emissaries. Therefore, in 2003, the Department of the Army directed the creation of the military occupational specialty (MOS) 09L, translator and interpreter.<sup>2</sup>

Recruitment for the program began with program managers scouting out local civilians already providing translation services as contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan. Then, Army recruiters across the United States began campaigns in places with dense populations of people with Middle Eastern and North African heritage, such as New York, Michigan, and California. The result was establishment of a robust translation capability with representatives from nearly two dozen countries speaking almost twenty languages and dialects, an asset that could not have been remotely paralleled by training U.S.-born native English speakers.<sup>3</sup>

Despite a promising start and many accomplishments, the program is far from meeting its potential. A flawed design limits its effectiveness. Consequently, the Army should modify the 09L MOS program in three major ways to ensure the maximum benefit to the force:

- ◆ Create additional skill identifier codes for different languages.
- ◆ Station the 09Ls at installations such as Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Fort Lewis, Washington.
- ◆ Establish a centralized staff support element for training, funding, sourcing, recruiting, and deploying.

First, this article gives a short history of the 09L MOS program. Then it explains the flaws that are hindering its effectiveness. Finally, it shows why implementing these three recommendations would help the program achieve its potential.

## History of the 09L Program

In the program's early days, 09Ls completed an English language immersion course, Basic Combat Training, and Advanced Individual Training. Then, they were discharged

to the Individual Ready Reserve to wait for deployment orders. Within a few years, the program's success warranted expansion; so, in 2008, two translator interpreter companies (TICOs)—the 51st TICO at Fort Irwin, California, and the 52nd TICO at Fort Polk, Louisiana—were activated to train and deploy nearly three hundred active duty 09Ls in support of contingency operations and joint exercises around the world.<sup>4</sup>

By placing the TICOs at Combat Training Centers (CTCs), the Department of the Army hoped to further train the 09Ls in Army doctrine and English by giving them the opportunity to interact with soldiers from across the Army who came to participate in training rotations. In turn, the rotational-training-unit soldiers were expected to benefit from interacting with the 09Ls who would staff mock towns and replicate conditions in overseas operational areas.

## Major Flaws in the 09L Program

The placement of the TICOs at the CTCs in 2008 was well intentioned, but by 2013, the program was rife with problems because of the companies' locations. Limiting assignments to the TICOs at these two installations means that 09Ls and their families can only permanently change station between Fort Irwin and Fort Polk.

As a result, 09Ls face the grim prospect of entire careers stationed in the Mohave Desert or the backwoods of Louisiana, excluded from other stations where personal cultural, religious, and language needs could be better met. For example, the nearest religious services conducted by legitimate imams for Muslims stationed at Fort Irwin are more than one hundred miles away. In addition, other challenges impede recruits from choosing to remain with the Army as translators and interpreters. For example, the commissary stocks food products that are unfamiliar to their families, many spouses remain jobless and face complete social isolation due to the remote locations, and families whose members have severe or chronic medical conditions have to travel up to six hours round-trip for specialized or emergency medical care. At the time this article was written, some soldiers and their families serving in TICOs at Fort Irwin had been living this way for seven consecutive years. These living conditions no doubt contributed to low reenlistment rates across the entire 09L program.<sup>5</sup>

Limiting the TICOs to Fort Irwin and Fort Polk not only negatively affects the quality of life for 09Ls but also hinders the Army's ability to train and employ them for

their intended purposes. They need to be where they can have more interaction with Army and civilian communities, for their own professional growth and for supporting other language learners.

As a practical matter, high-quality translation and interpretation are not rendered merely by assembling words literally translated from one language into another. To be effective, professional translators and interpreters need a comprehensive understanding of the cultural backgrounds, languages, and motivations of all parties for whom they are translating. Just as native English-speaking soldiers studying other languages need to interact with native speakers of the languages studied (preferably through language immersion), so do U.S. Army translators, who are not native speakers of English, need to interact with English-speaking Americans. They need extensive social interaction with other soldiers and other U.S. civilians, more than Fort Irwin or Fort Polk can provide through training rotations, so they can improve their proficiency in idiomatic American English and gain intimate familiarity with American cultures.

To illustrate the challenge of rendering an idiomatically correct translation, consider a word-for-word translation of the English language statement “I made a friend today” into German. The phrase would have the awkward literal meaning of “I constructed a new friend today.” Other examples of idioms in English that might cause problems if only rendered as literal word-for-word translations into another language come from a cultural tradition of British naval dominance that has filled the English language with metaphors about seafaring: “That ship has sailed;” “This ship sails itself;” or “She runs a tight ship.” In practice, these phrases are commonly used metaphorically in circumstances that have nothing to do with ships or sailing. If a translator comes from a historically landlocked culture unfamiliar with the intent of the metaphor, rather than its literal meaning, these idioms make no sense. All known languages are filled with such metaphors, the meaning of which can only be learned with time and experience by intimate and constant exposure to a language even as it is evolving.

Skilled translators and interpreters need sufficient familiarity with U.S. cultures and routine exposure to American



(Photo courtesy of Capt. Jessica L. Cook, U.S. Army)

Family members of Army translators assigned to the 51st Translator Interpreter Company, Fort Irwin, California, enjoy each other's company during a unit event in 2014.

English so they can master the nuances of American jargon. They need practice hearing and using American English and choosing just the right way of interpreting meaning to achieve the intentions of both parties. During operations, they often interpret language without the benefit of time for research or reflection. They need practice applying critical and creative thinking skills to render precise interpretations of meaning. This is a serious matter. In many situations, the stakes for misunderstanding or misinterpretation due to the inability of interpreters to properly phrase and communicate shades of meaning are high. In a tenuous situation, such as a first meeting after hostilities, one communication misstep could spell disaster for all involved.

Thus, translation can be viewed as a microcosm of diplomacy that requires frequent, lifelong, specialized training as well as ongoing meaningful exchanges with a variety of people from all walks of life. Staffing a town in the CTC training areas or completing online writing classes at the education center looks great on paper but in no way prepares translators for the intricacies involved in their craft. However, despite the critical need, the CTCs do not have the personnel, systems, or facilities to provide the services needed by the 09L MOS for professional development. As a result, the Army is inadequately resourcing this precious and highly perishable capability. With limited investment in resourcing and managing the program, the Department

of the Army will get only limited—if not diminishing—returns on its investment.

During their tenures at Fort Polk and Fort Irwin, in spite of limitations and hardships, the O9L soldiers have provided dedicated support to operations all over the world. In the fifteen months before the writing of this article, the TICOs provided translators for more than a dozen overseas joint exercises with strategic ally nations (to include supporting a multitude of conferences leading up to the exercises). They deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, helped validate language training and tests for the Defense Language Institute, and provided support to Special Forces field exercises—all in addition to maintaining regular soldier skills and supporting CTC operations.

### Ways to Improve the O9L Program

The first major change in the O9L program should be to create additional skill identifier codes that would give Human Resources Command managers, recruiters, commanders, and operations and exercise planners more control over matching operational language needs with recruiting and staffing. For instance, an Arabic speaker should have different coding than a Dari speaker. This would open the doors for assigning O9Ls with regionally aligned units, where they would be gainfully employed. One result of less than optimal efforts to manage translators and interpreters is that, as of 2015, fewer than 50 percent of the available TICO language capabilities were being employed.<sup>6</sup> Historically, mission requirements have called mainly for Arabic speakers, leaving many Farsi, Dari, Urdu, Pashtu, and Tajik speakers available to the force otherwise unemployed.

The second major change to the O9L program should be to station translators and interpreters at locations with facilities and units capable of supporting their training and deployment needs. Fort Lewis, Washington, and Fort Bragg, North Carolina, would be good candidates for locations to which O9Ls and their families could be assigned. Both have robust language centers, fully staffed deployment apparatuses, and adequate

medical facilities. Both are near airports and are home bases for other Army units, such as civil affairs and Special Forces—whose own foreign language-trained soldiers would benefit from regular interactions with native speakers. Additionally, both are near large, cosmopolitan civilian communities that can accommodate family needs.

Just as important, relocation of the TICOs would broaden training opportunities for O9Ls and give commanders more flexibility and control over deployments. Moreover, it would improve the quality of life for O9Ls and their families, increasing prospects for reenlistment and continuity of continued regionally oriented service.

The third major change would be to create one centralized staff support element to manage and coordinate all aspects of training, funding, sourcing, recruiting, and deploying O9Ls. At present, the Army has no centralized system of O9L management. The U.S. Army Forces Command G-2 (intelligence element) manages exercises and deployments. Language training and testing receive occasional support by an office at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center in San Antonio, Texas, and another at Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California. Human Resources Command manages recruitment and promotion



(Photo by Sgt. Zachary A. Gardner, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment PAO)

Capt. Mohammed Muqsood Ali Khan, a Muslim chaplain with the 18th Airborne Corps, visits with Muslim soldiers and civilians 23 March 2015 after a Jum'ah, a Friday prayer service, at the Center Chapel at Fort Irwin, California. Khan also visited with the leaders of the 51st Translator Interpreter Company, Regimental Support Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, to discuss cultural awareness and understanding. The unit has one of the highest concentrations of Muslim soldiers in the Army.

decisions. Commands at Fort Irwin and Fort Polk train, employ, and care for individual O9L soldiers, but these installations' attention and priorities ordinarily focus on training of rotational units rather than O9Ls. The lack of an entity responsible for coordinating all aspects of lifecycle career management of O9Ls, more than any other shortcoming, is costing the Army time and money and causing the pointless waste of a very valuable asset.

## Translators and Interpreters as Soldiers

Caught in the middle of the O9L program's flaws are the Army's translators and interpreters. They are soldiers who have chosen to serve and protect the interests of the United States of America. Often, their

service places family members who remain in their native countries at great risk. Family members who accompany them also sacrifice much. Translators and interpreters have chosen military service for many reasons that include embracing the American dream of opportunity, supporting the American mission in the Middle East, or simply expressing gratitude to a nation that has embraced them and restored their sense of hope and given them a new life.

The Army needs O9L capabilities. Consequently, the Army should properly manage and develop the capabilities of these soldiers. It should appropriately accommodate their families and adequately address their concerns and issues. It should ensure their services are fully and gainfully employed in assisting the United States with its missions around the world. ■

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## Notes

1. Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army-Manpower and Reserve Affairs, *O9L Translator Aide: Evaluation of Two Year Pilot Program*, 28 September 2005, 1; Committee Reports, 108th Congress (2003-2004) House Report 108-767, accessed 3 August 2015, [http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&sid=cp1085KQMG&r\\_n=hr767.108&hd\\_count=50&&sel=TOC\\_1912327&](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&sid=cp1085KQMG&r_n=hr767.108&hd_count=50&&sel=TOC_1912327&); see also, Defense Language Transformation Roadmap, January 2005, Office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense, 1, accessed 4 August 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/news/mar2005/d20050330roadmap.pdf>.

2. Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army-Manpower and Reserve Affairs, *O9L Translator Aide*, 1; John J. Kruzel, "Army to Activate First Company of Native Linguists-Turned-Soldiers", DOD news release, 15 October 2008, accessed 4 August 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/newsarticle.aspx?id=51522>.

3. Headquarters, Department of the Army, G-2, "Organizational Design Paper," memorandum for commander, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 16 February 2006, details the need for an active duty capability and expansion of recruiting; "The 51st TICO (Translator Interpreter Company)," U.S. Army STAND-TO website, 28 May 2009, accessed 4 August 2015, <http://www.army.mil/standto/archive/2009/05/28/>.

4. "The 51st TICO," STAND-TO; "Language Company First in Army," Army.mil website, accessed 4 August 2015, <http://www.army.mil/article/13503/language-company-first-in-army/>, C. Todd Lopez, "Language Company First in Army," 22 October 2008, online news article, accessed 11 June 2015, <http://www.army.mil/article/13503/language-company-first-in-army/>.

5. Paul F. Hogan et al., "Chapter 4—Analysis of Staffing and Special and Incentive Pays in Selected Communities," *The Eleventh Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation*, June 2012, 134–135, accessed 4 August 2015, [http://militarypay.defense.gov/reports/qrmc/11th\\_QRMC\\_Supporting\\_Research\\_Papers\\_\(932pp\)\\_Linked.pdf](http://militarypay.defense.gov/reports/qrmc/11th_QRMC_Supporting_Research_Papers_(932pp)_Linked.pdf). The report states, "first-term retention rates average around 50 percent across the services"; Sarah O. Meadows, et al., *Exploring the Association between Military Base Neighborhood Characteristics and Soldiers' and Airmen's Outcomes*, RAND Corporation technical report, 2013, 48, accessed 4 August 2015, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR1200/TR1234/RAND\\_TR1234.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/TR1200/TR1234/RAND_TR1234.pdf). The study rated thirty-six Army installations on the quality of their neighborhoods, considering the domains of social, housing, employment, income and poverty, and transportation. Fort Irwin was ranked 33rd overall and Fort Polk was ranked 23rd; At the time this article was written, representatives from the Department of the Army G-2, the U. S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence O9L Initial Entry Training Program Office, and the O9L Human Resource Managers were discussing low retention concerns with TICO commanders. According to an August 2014 Human Resource Command MOS manning brief, in this author's possession, the O9L MOS was over-strength for E4s (corporals and specialists), but significantly understrength for noncommissioned officers.

6. This statement is based on two years of deployment and mission tracking data by the author as the 51st TICO commander. See also "Translators Wanted in the Army," Military.com website, 2 March 2015, accessed 4 August 2015, <http://www.military.com/military-report/translators-wanted-in-the-army.html>.