



U.S. Army religions affairs specialists and chaplains deployed to Camp Arifjan and Camp Buehring, Kuwait, tour the Grand Mosque in Kuwait City, Kuwait, on Nov. 17, 2021. The cultural awareness training enhanced the Soldiers' understanding of Kuwait's religious and cultural heritage while they built relationships with their Kuwaiti counterparts. (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Mary Katzenberger)

Cultural Awareness as a Weapon

Leveraging Regional Expertise for Overseas Success

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U.S. Army history is riddled with the consequences of deploying poorly trained, culturally ignorant Soldiers to unfamiliar foreign environments. In an article on deficiencies of cultural competence in military leaders, Laurence (2011) writes, "Cultural ignorance can have serious consequences. We must adapt to different cultures; we must be able to interpret the behavior of

others and act accordingly" (p. 494). In 2012, then-Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno directed the Army to improve its ability to engage with regional partners (Brooks, 2014). He nested guidance firmly in the 2008 and 2010 National Security Strategy emphasizing international military partnerships (O'Mahony et al., 2017). Later that year, Odierno implemented Regionally

Aligned Forces (RAF) via executive order (O’Mahony et al., 2017). By training Soldiers and their organizations for specific operational environments before arrival, the U.S. Army sends better prepared Soldiers to interact with foreign populations. This is great on paper, but Odierno’s RAF initiative needs to go deeper.

To truly produce forces capable of winning conflicts centered around foreign populaces, the Army must expand this concept to the individual Soldier level across the force.

Providing Soldiers with individual training in areas such as culture and language complement the organization’s Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) alignment and produces units capable of operating successfully in any foreign environment. Widespread implementation of the RAF concept will produce culturally fluent Soldiers and operational units able to operate successfully within and around foreign populations.

Background

The Army’s RAFs are either organically assigned or aligned to combatant commands and prepared for regional missions. They represent the Army’s total force, including the active, reserve and national guard components (McHugh, 2012). Aligning U.S. Army units to GCCs allows them to focus training on specific regions. This focus enables units to immediately support the GCC regardless of the mission. RAF units become major force enablers that can forge relationships and build influence with local populations, leaders, and military forces (Brooks, 2014). The Army’s RAF implementation offers improved capabilities to GCCs and supports security and stability efforts overseas.

Once designated, RAF units embark on a cultural and regional training pipeline. Training begins with a combat training center rotation, followed by GCC and regional-specific training requirements, including cultural expertise and language training (Pepper, 2016). Forces receive basic introductions to the culture and history of the country to which the Department of Defense (DOD) has aligned them.

This training occurs at home stations or by distance learning and mobile training teams. Its overall quality and effectiveness vary. Units fully embracing the concept may also integrate regional training into other individual and collective training exercises. In practice, the U.S. Army has not always emphasized regional awareness in its deploying forces, sometimes resulting in unfavorable outcomes.

The Benefits of Culturally Competent Soldiers

The benefits of RAF and deploying culturally competent Soldiers to overseas operations outweigh the cost of the needed training resources, time being chief among them. These benefits include successful operations, culturally self-aware professional Soldiers and unique missions contributing to unit esprit de corps and retention.

Established Precedence

Select Army organizations trained and operated successfully under regional alignment long before the RAF implementation. The U.S. Army Special Operations Command has long been a leader in cultural training due to some of its unique missions. Special Operations Forces (SOF), including psychological operations and civil affairs Soldiers, operate globally, conducting missions requiring cultural competence for success. This specialized training enables them to arrive in theater and quickly integrate with host nation partners.

Since their inception, SOF have successfully advised and trained foreign security forces. Payne and Osburg (2013) attribute this success to the “depth and intricacy of their personnel selection and training...[and] the amount of time devoted to learning the complexities of relationship building” (p. 14). The DOD almost always regionally aligns SOF elements, allowing them the time required to develop regional expertise. Over a few years, special forces Soldiers become experts on a region’s language, history and culture. This knowledge allows them to build relationships with partners and communities within a GCC’s area of operations. One



Ahmed Jbouri, international relationship specialist, Area Support Group - Kuwait, teaches various facets of Kuwaiti culture to senior Task Force Spartan leadership, Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, Aug. 3, 2023. (U.S. Army Photo by Capt. Austin May)



An M1A2 Abrams main battle tank from the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, fires its 120mm gun downrange during a coalition combined arms live fire exercise, part of Eager Lion 2019, in Jordan, Sept. 5, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Darron Salzer, Task Force Spartan)

example of special operations forces’ success is a long DOD partnership with Jordan.

SOF teams provide training and advisory support to their counterparts in the Jordanian military, participating in annual training exercises such as Eager Light and Eager Lion (Harrington et al., 2015). Through this partnership, the Jordanian army is better postured to provide stability in the Middle East, a key mission for U.S. Central Command.

The U.S. Army National Guard embraces regional alignment with its State Partnership Program (SPP). The SPP, which partners U.S. State National Guard units with a partner nation, aims to increase both participating militaries’ proficiency (Kuhlman, 2018).

The program’s success is currently on display in the Russia-Ukraine War. The California National Guard partnered with Ukraine in 1993, providing critical training to its air and ground forces while building a relationship between the two nations (Garamone, 2022).

In addition to the global security benefits provided by the SPP, participating National Guard Soldiers gain valuable cultural experience. As relationships between States and partner nations remain constant, Guard Soldiers have time for their experience to develop into expertise.

Benefit to the Force

One immediate benefit of regional focus is the realism and effectiveness it adds to unit training. For years, U.S. military training exercises revolved around the Pineland scenario, where U.S. forces fought in a made-up land with a made-up background. RAF has increased focus on the U.S. Army Training and

Doctrine Command’s (TRADOC) Decisive Action Training Environment (DATE).

DATE allows units to focus their training and exercises on real geographical locations, using real-world operational environment data (TRADOC, n.d.). Pepper (2016) writes, “For Army units involved in RAF, the devotion to a particular region helps provide purpose for home-station training, ensuring that they focus on what combatant commanders want” (p. 33). Regional focus results in more engaging home station training while simultaneously preparing Soldiers and units

for the specific region where they will operate.

In 2006, Capt. Travis L. Patriquin, 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division, provided one example of the profound impact a Soldier’s regional expertise has on military operations. Patriquin, a Civil Affairs officer with a keen interest in culture and language, was responsible for educating his superiors on the tribes of Ramadi, Iraq (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019).

Patriquin’s cultural expertise, resulting from immersion training and language self-study, was instrumental in the unit’s efforts against al-Qaeda in Iraq. Through his communication skills, he earned the trust of local tribe members and sheiks. This trust grew into wider influence and tactical success in the Anbar and Baghdad provinces (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019). After an improvised explosive device killed Patriquin in 2006, multitudes of the Anbari tribal sheiks attended his memorial to pay their respects because of his impact on security in their region.

Patriquin’s success with the Anbari tribes demonstrates the benefits culturally trained Soldiers and RAFs provide to GCCs. Providing a more predictable source of culturally proficient troops and capabilities enables the GCC to increase partner effectiveness and regional security. Judy (2016) writes that this capability allows GCCs to be more proactive in preventing unconventional warfare in their regions. Regional alignment enables trusted cultural specialists to engage foreign populations to build trust and avoid hostilities. Much as the benefits of cultural proficiency are numerous, so are the paths to obtain it.

Cultural Ignorance at Abu Ghraib

Odierno himself witnessed the importance of cultural awareness during the Iraq conflict. Describing the failures, he stated, “We went in there with a complete misunderstanding, regionally and inside of Iraq, of what was going on. I don’t ever want that to happen again” (Brooks, 2014). The situations Soldiers face overseas, already stressed by war demands, require cultural understanding to resolve successfully.

In late 2003, the media broke the story that U.S. Soldiers committed gross law of land warfare violations at the Abu Ghraib detention facility. Soldiers of the 800th Military Police Brigade “carried out numerous sadistic and perverse acts on detainees, including sodomizing them, stacking them naked, threatening them with dogs and weapons, beating them and depriving them of sleep” (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019 p. 274).

Two commanding officers were relieved, and 11 Soldiers were convicted of crimes for their actions. Among his many recommendations, the investigating officer included additional training for those managing foreign detainees (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019). The Soldiers’ actions portray a picture of the xenophobia that may occur when one lacks any measure of cultural intelligence.

The impact of Abu Ghraib was far-ranging in both the U.S. and internationally. Audiences saw the abuse as appalling. It decreased support for the war and contributed to losing coalition partners abroad (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019).

Perhaps more impactful was its effect on coalition adversaries. News of the acts gave perceived legitimacy to insurgents’ cause and jihadists fighting in Iraq. Their recruiting increased, further intensifying the fighting throughout the region (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019).

Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, stated, “In my experience, we found that nearly every first-time jihadist claimed Abu Ghraib first had jolted him to action” (as cited in Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019a, p. 312). While the harm of deploying the culturally ignorant can extend globally, so can the benefits.

Training Solutions

In 2013, when the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, was designated the Army’s first RAF brigade, it did not fall in on a training plan. As often happens to the first in the chute, the brigade was not handed a roadmap for developing cultural expertise and had to build its own (Brooks, 2014).

According to Brooks (2014), unit leaders “scrounged up African students and Africa experts at nearby Kansas State University and enlisted their help in designing a training course” (p. 45). Fortunately, their success resulted in further development of sociocultural training plans for the force. Regardless of an organization’s RAF status,

numerous training solutions are available to improve Soldiers’ or units’ cultural competence.

Training Standards

Cultural, Regional Expertise and Language (CREL) training is the Army’s answer to DOD’s directive to increase sociocultural proficiency across the force. DOD (2015) policy states, “Foreign language skills, regional expertise and cultural capabilities are enduring critical competencies essential to the DoD mission and must be managed to maximize the accession, development, sustainment, enhancement and employment of these critical skills to the DoD mission” (p. 2). At a minimum, the policy requires military personnel deploying overseas to have the ability to communicate in the local language and a basic awareness of the regional culture (DOD, 2015). DOD Instruction 5160.70 provides extensive guidance for CREL training implementation and standards.

Army Regulation 350-1 echoes DOD guidance, which says forces must be capable of operating in close contact with foreign populations for the Army to succeed. It extends foreign language proficiency beyond traditional users (e.g., linguists and interrogators) to every Soldier and extends its range to include communicating with language survival tools (Department of the Army [DA], 2017). The aims of cross-cultural competency include understanding culture, applying organizational awareness, cultural perspective-taking and cultural adaptability, regardless of job or rank.

Cross-cultural competence does not focus on a specific region but on general awareness of cultural concepts that better enable Soldiers to interact with people of other cultures (DA, 2017). The ability to influence a member of a foreign culture requires a basic level of cultural understanding. Cross-cultural competence is akin to a university introductory sociology course and can occur in a classroom or through distance learning.

Regional competence and expertise come with lengthy training and study toward a particular region and culture. Soldiers attain regional expertise when they thoroughly understand the variables (e.g., political, historical, sociological, economic) impacting a global area (DA, 2017).

Regional expertise is especially critical to those Soldiers and units whose mission requires them to develop rapport and influence with a foreign population. Psychological operations units, for example, can only win the hearts and minds of a target audience after first understanding the forces that shape that audience’s decision-making.

In the hands of average Soldiers, regional expertise allows them to communicate intelligently, avoid accidentally offending the local populace and better forecast the effects of their operations on the population.

Training Resources

Multiple training solutions are available to leaders who want to increase their unit’s cultural capital. Foremost among them are TRADOC’s language and cultural training centers. Primarily focused on providing cultural training to deploying organizations, the TRADOC Culture Center provides mobile training teams (i.e., a trainer travels to the unit) and distance learning products for Soldiers to use remotely (Markel et al., 2015).

One example is the Joint Base Lewis-McChord Language and Culture Center. It aims to provide initial training for deployment and sustainment training for those seeking to maintain their proficiency (Markel et al., 2015). Units identified for RAF or interested in increasing their Soldiers’ cultural proficiency can begin their training plans with available TRADOC resources.

As mentioned, TRADOC’s DATE knowledge base is available to units wishing to increase their training’s realism and long-term effectiveness. The regional data available through DATE can add a real-world application to mission analysis training. However, the real power of DATE lies in its use for scenario background. Planners no longer need to rely on dated, played-out scenarios like Pineland or start from scratch. Instead, they select a global region from DATE and allow its database to populate all facets of the operational environment.

While the Army has long stressed the value of train-as-you-fight, it has not always extended the concept to training scenarios. The regional knowledge gained during exercises remain relevant to DATE-based scenarios during future deployments.

Conclusion

Implementing regionally focused cultural awareness training across the force will result in more Soldiers and organizations able to provide immediate value to a GCC.

The atrocities committed by U.S. Soldiers overseas, like Abu Ghraib, are a stark reminder of what can happen when Soldiers face wartime conditions without cultural training.

Conversely, the strong relationship between the U.S. and Ukrainian militaries and the profound respect earned by Patriquin from the people of Anbar Province serve as a reminder of the power of cultural knowledge in relationship building.

A military force cannot assume training for one global region will transfer to another anymore than its experience in unconventional warfare prepares it for large-scale combat operations. Aligning Soldiers of the operational force for global coverage is the first step toward fulfilling Odierno’s dream of transitioning the DOD into a globally responsive and regionally engaged force. ■

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