

# **“Baptism By Fire”**

## **Operators and Pre-Deployment Training**

**K McDonald, 2015**

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

## **Important Note**

The operators who participated in this research generously gave their time to answer my questions and educate me about their experiences. In return, I agreed that all operators would remain anonymous and any identifying agencies or details would be redacted. Security was their primary concern, and I took great care not to compromise any operator's identity. Each operator had the opportunity to review this research prior to submission. This document has been modified from my original research for the purposes of public distribution.

Although I wanted to capture the personality of each operator, I also wanted to protect anonymity. Therefore, all operators were assigned randomized numerical code names (*OPERATOR 1*, *OPERATOR 2*, etc). I will let their quotations speak for their personalities.

## Table of Contents

Abbreviations Guide.....	1
An Introduction to Operators: “OPSEC, b****, OPSEC!” .....	2
Research Focus.....	5
Cultural Training: Why It Matters.....	10
Cultural Training: How Effective Is It? .....	13
Solutions.....	19
Parting Thoughts.....	22
Works Cited.....	24

## **Abbreviations Guide**

**CI:** counterintelligence

**HTS:** Human Terrain System

**OPSEC:** operational security

**SME:** Subject Matter Expert

## **An Introduction to Operators: “OPSEC, b\*\*\*\*, OPSEC”**

It was a mild, sunny day in Soggy Rock, the small Oregon coastal town *OPERATOR I* had chosen as a starting point to guide me through a virtual training program. Since I was studying the role of cultural training for operators and how it affects mission success, I needed to get an idea of the environment operators experience during their initial training. *OPERATOR I*'s training program was designed to mimic what would take place at an advanced training center, but he also threw in training techniques he had encountered in the many organizations he had worked for over the years.

So far, the training program had felt like a roller coaster. In the beginning, I thought *OPERATOR I* would just walk me through what sort of classes operators took while in training, but instead he was trying to show me the larger picture of the knowledge operators need to have and how training situations play out in the real world. Most of the training program had consisted of sleep deprivation, stressful multitasking, car rides, meals at various bars and restaurants, radical deviation of plans, exposure to different cultures and socioeconomic statuses, and walking tours of various cities, where *OPERATOR I* was quick to point out odd individuals and how he would handle their behavior in a tactical situation, or what he would do if a bomb suddenly went off. When he asked me what I would do in a given situation, I rarely had helpful answers. I was starting to develop an understanding of just how much knowledge operators need to keep in the back of their mind – and it's a lot.

On this particular occasion, *OPERATOR I* had offered to drive me to a place he liked to have lunch. I was carrying some mail I had just picked up at the post office, and I set it on the back seat so it wouldn't be in the way when I got back in the car.

Remembering his penchant for security, I carefully locked and closed the car door and started walking toward the restaurant. All of a sudden, I heard, "Wait a minute!"

I turned around, and *OPERATOR 1* was standing at the back seat staring at where I had set down my mail. *How did he even notice that?* I thought. *Does he always check all four doors and the trunk of his car?*

I walked back and asked, "What's wrong?"

He pointed to the mail. "OPSEC, bitch, OPSEC!" he exclaimed half-jokingly. By now, we had been doing interviews long enough that I realized "bitch" was simply his current noun of choice and not meant offensively in any way. I had long since gotten over the fact that he was able to use profanity as a noun, verb, adjective, and pronoun, and that such colorful language seemed to be his trademark. Still, I didn't understand what my mail had to do with **OP**erational **SEC**urity.

He shook his head, as if I wasn't getting it fast enough. "Never leave your mail face-up," he said. "Anybody can go by, identify you, your vehicle, your passengers, anything like that. They now know where you live and who you are."

At first, I thought this was part of the training program, but over time, I realized that this was just one of many protocols that *OPERATOR 1* always follows. He never stops being an operator. Just because he is not on a deployment right now doesn't mean he can relax the protocols that protect his identity and location. My participant-observation with *OPERATOR 1* taught me that in order to evaluate cultural training programs for operators, it is essential to understand the complex, high-risk world in which they operate.

Various aspects of *OPERATOR 1*'s training and experience are in use all the time, and I have seen them at work when he was able to calm a newly immigrated Arab Muslim mother with

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

a simple, "*As-salaam*", or when he nearly made a Sikh retail employee fall over in surprise when he addressed him in Punjabi with a polite, "*Sat sri akal*". The cultural knowledge that he has gained overseas not only helps him survive high-risk missions, it also enables him to better interact with the diverse populations who live in the United States.

## Research Focus

Both Fischer in “Cross-cultural training effects on cultural essentialism beliefs and cultural intelligence” and Forte in “The Human Terrain System and Anthropology” address the problem of cultural knowledge. In order for operators to be successful in their missions, they need a thorough knowledge of local culture and how to negotiate various hierarchies. Many training programs have been devised to ensure that operators have this knowledge, but the efficacy of these programs has not been fully assessed. Fischer asserts that a cultural training intervention will indeed be successful at raising participants’ levels of cultural essentialism and cultural intelligence, but he notes that personality traits such as open-mindedness render an individual more likely to change his or her behavior as a result of the training (Fischer 2011). It is important to note that cultural essentialism is defined as how members of a culture are seen as alike, and this understanding actually enhances cultural intelligence because individuals understand the extent to which culture motivates behavior (Fischer 2011). Forte takes a different approach, surveying the efforts of the United States government to embed cultural experts with military and intelligence units in the Human Terrain System or HTS (Forte 2011). The assumption the government is making is that operators cannot possibly learn all the information on another culture necessary for mission success, so having an expert on-hand is preferable. Unfortunately, the HTS has been broadly condemned by the American Anthropological Association’s Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the U.S. Security and Intelligence Communities as unethical: “where data collection occurs in the context of war, integrated into the goals of counterinsurgency, and in a potentially coercive environment—all characteristic factors of the HTS concept and its application—it can no longer be considered a

legitimate professional exercise of anthropology” (Forte 2011:151). In the presence of this controversy, operators must fall back on pre-deployment cultural training.

Fischer’s study took the question, “Is cultural training effective?” and grouped it into units of time, “How long must cultural training take place for it to be effective?” This is especially important for my research given that operators from different agencies have been exposed to different types and length of pre-deployment training. During my research, I asked questions derived from Fischer’s study to assess an individual’s open-mindedness and knowledge of other cultures prior to pre-deployment training. A useful theoretical concept for my research is the concept of cultural essentialism as presented in Fischer’s study:

Essentialist beliefs capture the extent to which members of a category are seen as alike. The literature suggests that essentialist beliefs about social groups (race, gender, disease, class, etc.) are a precursor for stereotyping (see Haslam et al., 2006; Morton et al., 2009; Prentice & Miller, 2007). Yet, in intercultural situations forming essential categories about culture as a meta-category may be beneficial (Fischer 2011:770).

Recognizing that cultural essentialism does not necessarily lead to racism, prejudice, and stereotyping means that part of my ethnographic process involved measuring an operator’s level of cultural essentialism and determining how training affected it.

I undertook this ethnography in order to answer the question: **Is the cultural training provided to operators (military, contractors, government personnel) prior to deployment on overseas missions sufficient to allow them to make informed decisions in matters of culture that affect the success of their mission?** To answer this, I looked at what cultural training is provided to operators, the types of missions operators are deployed on that involve cross-cultural interaction, and what types of operators there are. I was able to gather a moderate spectrum of operators to interview so that I could get a wider view of cultural training programs throughout government organizations. The operators I interviewed participated in US military,

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

paramilitary, and private contracting organizations. Most operators had deployed to the Middle East, but several also had experience from the Korean War and other East Asian operations. Many of the operators I interviewed have worn multiple “hats” over the years, meaning that they may have started in a military branch, for example, and subsequently worked their way into a different organizational structure such as the Department of Homeland Security.

One operator characterized his team as a “hydra”, able to operate in many different ways at once to achieve an objective. I believe that this “hydra” model also encompasses operators as a whole: there are so many “heads” (departments, operations, operator roles, etc.) that it is a monumental task to survey all cultural training methods and determine their true efficacy. The sprawling nature of operator systems can also lead to problems with communication, team knowledge, and teamwork on joint operations.

During the course of my interviews and participant-observation, I encountered a theme of what one operator termed “professional jealousies” between various organizations. For example, several military operators criticized the methods of special operations teams, and several special operations team members criticized the methods of the CIA. One reason for this is that each organization has its own brand of training and vetting procedures, so a highly selective organization such as the CIA may not have as much confidence in what they consider a less selective organization like the military. Because each organization performs different functions, it is not possible to construct a uniform cultural training for all operators who will deploy. This results in a lack of information sharing between organizations, prompting two operators to lament that joint operations can be difficult because operators are not all “on the same page”.

Since many of the operators I interviewed have belonged to multiple organizations over the years, they each experienced a variety of different training methods. During the course of my

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

interviews, I found that the cultural training provided to operators varied greatly depending on the operator's department, role, and the expected length of the operator's deployment. For the most part, operators were dissatisfied with the initial (pre-deployment) cultural training that they received; however, just as many operators developed confidence from ongoing cultural training after deployment. A few operators of various organizations described almost nonexistent cultural training prior to deploying to the Middle East: they basically received a crash course in survival Arabic but nothing else. Other operators reported receiving training about Islam in general and the basic rules of politeness in the Arab world, but essential details such as the difference between Sunnis and Shias and not accepting gifts with your left hand were not covered. Most operators reported turning to self-study to supplement their (initially) limited cultural knowledge.

I asked operators how they would improve the cultural training they initially received. Major themes that emerged from this last question included cultural training focused on immersion that is as close to what operators will be experiencing while deployed as possible. When supplementing their pre-deployment cultural training, operators tended to seek out other operators with experience in the region under consideration, which demonstrates a need for accessible mentors who are experts in a particular field (several operators mentioned the helpfulness of Subject Matter Experts or SMEs). Specific areas of knowledge operators requested for pre-deployment training were monetary/trade value and currency, elder negotiations, social hierarchy, reading Arabic as opposed to speaking it, and the distinctions between different sects of Islam.

Overall, despite feeling that their cultural training was deficient, operators were able to successfully complete their missions by actively seeking out information from more experienced

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

operators as well as current literature. In order to be useful, cultural training needs to be immersive, current, and tailored to the mission and region at hand.

## Cultural Training: Why It Matters

Early in *OPERATOR 1*'s virtual training, I received a sharp reality check. That day, *OPERATOR 1* was driving his car around Soggy Rock while we talked about his early experiences with other cultures.

All of a sudden, a truck pulled out in front of us. Before I could even start to panic, *OPERATOR 1* effortlessly flicked the wheel to glide us away from the back of the truck. As he was maneuvering, he asked, "Okay, this is an urban area of Afghanistan and that truck just pulled out in front of you. What do you do?"

Feeling a bit stupid, I tossed out, "Shoot the truck?"

*OPERATOR 1* shook his head. "You back up about 50 feet and get out your gunmen. Remember, everybody wants to kill you, they are just choosing not to at this moment."

I looked at his face in surprise, but his expression was unreadable. Everything he had told me about his multicultural upbringing had suggested that he held an extremely tolerant view of other cultures, so I was shocked to hear something that seemed like such a blanket condemnation of an entire country. Tentatively, I suggested, "What happens if the truck was lost and the people inside don't mean any harm?"

*OPERATOR 1* shrugged. "It fucks you up to live like that. I'm fucked up. But I'd rather be fucked up than dead."

We drove on for a bit in silence as I tried to absorb *OPERATOR 1*'s mindset and understand how he could talk about the need to understand the differences between Sunni and Shia in one breath and advocate wiping out everyone in a truck simply because they pulled out in front of you in another. Seeing my confusion, *OPERATOR 1* commented, "It's hard here

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

[meaning the States] where everyone is NOT trying to kill you, but it could happen. You know, street gangs...you have to make snap judgments because your survival is at stake.”

Trying to see where his mindset fit with his training, I asked, “So what about the cultural training you receive? What would you say to a new recruit who has just graduated and been assigned to your team?”

*OPERATOR 1*'s expression hardened. “Forget everything you learned in training,” he said. “Follow MY orders. If you live by the book, you die by the book.”

“What about learning the language?” I asked. “Isn't it better not to have to rely on translators in life-or-death snap-judgment scenarios like the truck?”

*OPERATOR 1* shakes his head. “I would rather secure a translator. If you're on my team and we're on an op, I want you in your zone. When you are trying to translate, you put your mind in a different spot, when you need to be focused on ops. You can do amazing things in a classroom, but it all changes when you're in the field. You really need it in your muscle memory.”

He launched into a description of the Karate Kid. “You know how the old guy keeps making him wash the cars and everything, then finally when the kid starts doing karate, he doesn't have to think about the moves? That's how deeply this stuff has to be ingrained in you, so even while bullets are flying and people are screaming, your body knows what to do.”

This whole experience brought me back to the realization that cultural training needs to be grounded in the reality of the operator's world in order to be effective. My first solution to a truck pulling out in front of me in a foreign country would have been to just keep driving and wait to see what would happen. However, for their own safety, operators can't afford to give

people the benefit of the doubt. Sometimes there are situations where staying alive is more important than playing along with cultural niceties.

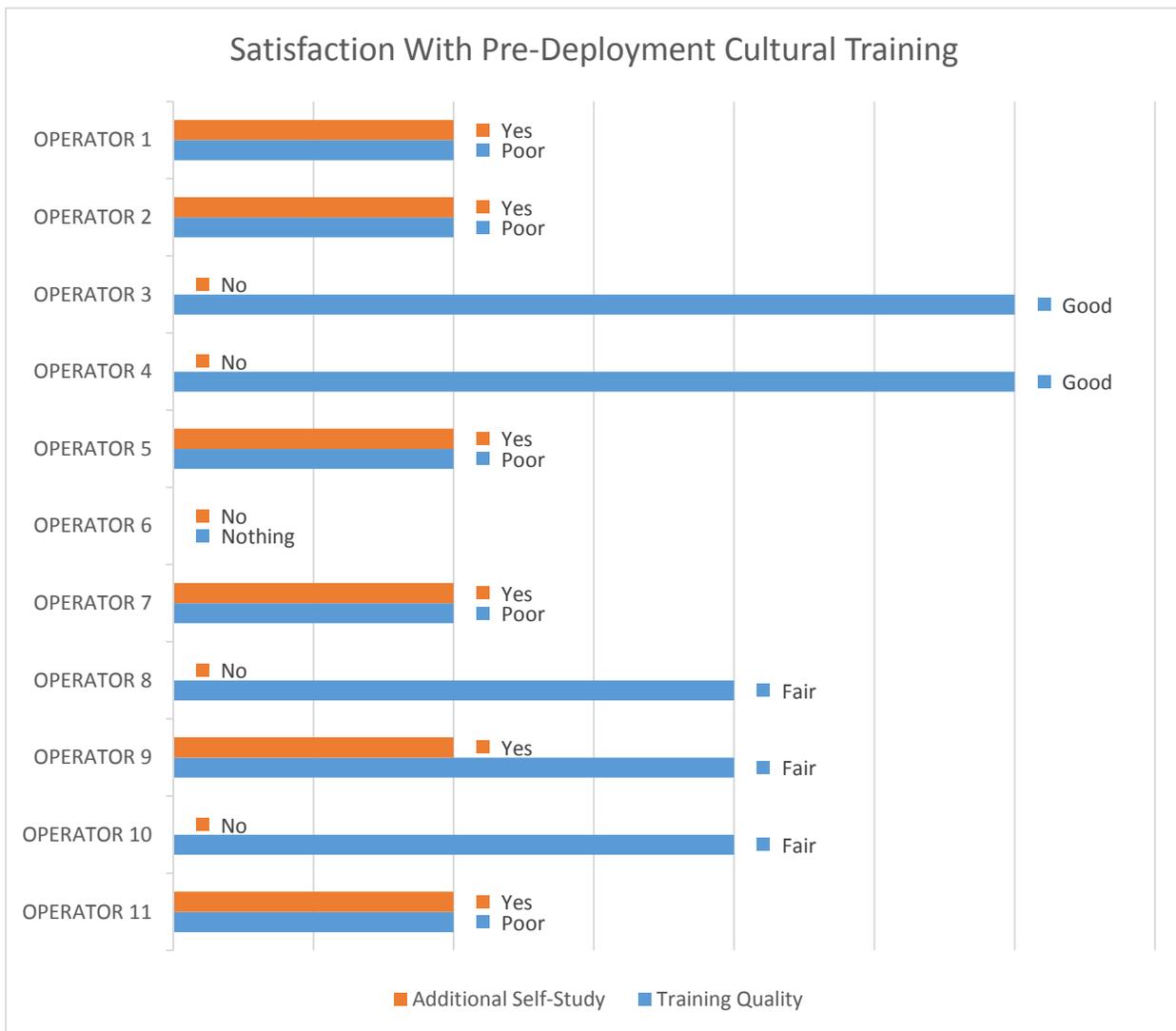
Although not every situation is salvageable, there are many situations where cultural training can help prevent unnecessary conflict and make it easier to communicate with the local population. *OPERATOR 2*, a retired operator with decades of experience in Marine and Army Counterintelligence, described how his self-study on Korea earned him an excellent working relationship with Korean government officials:

In 1987, I received orders to go to Korea. I had been teaching the CI [counterintelligence] course at Fort Huachuca since I arrived in the Army. I was very worried that because so many Army people and CI professionals had been to Korea, I would be behind the power curve. For six months, I studied and went to eat at Korean restaurants. I read Korean newspapers daily. When I got to Korea, it was a couple of months before the first election without an active-duty general in the election. There were three people named Kim running, and when I got to Korea, I was shocked to find that many of the agents who did liaison with the Korean government officials did not know the full names and politics of each of the Kims. I over-studied, and a lot of people made me look very good, which got me into my own created job to fix part of the problem. My over-preparedness created excellent rapport with the Korean government officials. They would take me to dinner because I would eat anything, versus the normal American who would say they could not eat the food. I ate strange things in survival training, and I could eat strange things with senior Korean officials. It made me a better team player and helped our missions.

In this case, *OPERATOR 2*'s knowledge of Korean culture and language provided him with a sizeable advantage over his peers and greatly contributed to his mission success. Lack of cultural awareness can result in operators inadvertently offending local populations, which in turn can increase local resentment and jeopardize mission success and operator safety.

## Cultural Training: How Effective Is It?

As I mentioned earlier, cultural training programs vary between organizations, and many of the operators I interviewed had been involved in multiple organizations over the years. While all operators agreed that there is a need for improvement in pre-deployment cultural training, feelings about their own training varied immensely.



It is important to note that even the operators who believed their training was excellent and thorough had comments about areas of the training that could be improved. While *OPERATOR 3* felt that his pre-deployment language training was good, he commented that the

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

Japanese he learned there was outdated by at least thirty years. Although the instructors were native speakers, they had immigrated just before World War II and “had not kept up with the changes in the Japanese language 40 years later”. *OPERATOR 4* rated his pre-deployment cultural training in the ‘60s as excellent, but he had a major problem with the language training:

The language training was intensive and more than satisfactory. **But the training was in the wrong language.** My country of assignment had two constitutional languages. I was taught one, but assigned to a region where another very different language was spoken.

*OPERATOR 3* reminded me that operator organizations are improving their training methods based on operator experiences overseas. He mentioned that several departments are utilizing instructors who are Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). He also told me that the military has officers who are sent to a particular region in order to become familiar with it and train other operators prior to their deployments. Various military branches have built mock villages based on their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to immerse operators in the environment as much as possible. However, his observations contrast with several other operators’ experiences.

*OPERATOR 6* commented, “In the Marines, we had zero training about people of other ethnicities. I had the most training from my Captain where I currently am.” *OPERATOR 2* also agreed that as an infantry Marine, he had “little to no understanding of culture. We did get small booklets that were phrase books, because every two weeks we would go to a new port visit.” He also remembers that, as Army Counterintelligence from the ‘70s to the ‘90s, he was shocked by the “poor country prep” that the Army did. However, he did mention that the Army now has Regionally Aligned Forces, where units are matched with the area they are most likely to be sent to and expected to study it before deployment.

One potential explanation for these discrepancies is operator age. The operators I interviewed ranged in age from about their thirties to their sixties. Both of the operators who had

overall positive feelings about their pre-deployment cultural training were on the upper end of the age scale, so their training may have been different from some of the younger operators who tended to have more negative feelings about their training. Given that the youngest operator was in his thirties and likely received his first pre-deployment cultural training ten years ago, there is not a good sampling of operators who have benefited from their organizations' updated training methods. It would be beneficial to conduct a study focusing on operators returning from their first deployments to measure the efficacy of their pre-deployment cultural training. One problem I encountered was that operators tended to view all of their training as a whole, rather than breaking it into pre-deployment versus post-deployment training. While they had many complaints about pre-deployment training, several of them rated their overall training as good because they were including the skills and knowledge they had gained over the years and through experience. This would not be as much of an issue with operators who have only been on one deployment.

*OPERATOR 5*, initially in the Navy, summed up the majority of the operators' experiences with his comment that his first overseas experience was a "baptism by fire". Several operators mentioned turning to cultural self-study after their first deployment in order to "feel safe". There seem to have been multiple situations where semi-educated guesses took the place of solid cultural knowledge. Several operators felt more confident on their first deployment because they had previous cultural knowledge from anthropology classes (not associated with their organization's pre-deployment cultural training).

As part of my research into improving pre-deployment cultural training, I asked operators how they would improve it and what they would teach to new operators. The overall response was that the training needs to be current, relevant, physical, and immersive. *OPERATOR 3*

emphasized that natives to the target area or experts with a lot of experience were preferable to “book smart” individuals with no practical experience:

I was called back to Washington for a Russian and East Asian studies training. This was conducted by the State Department, and it focused on Soviet Union satellite states and was about 2 weeks long. They brought in a PhD who talked about the KGB. Out of the 35 or so people attending, 8-10 were from the NYC FBI. They asked if the PhD had interviewed KGB defectors, and she said no. In the course of their questioning, it came out that she had just read about it: she was not an SME. An SME should have been in contact with real live Russian intelligence officers. The FBI contingent got up and left, and I don't blame them. Their job is to chase Russian spies in the USA, and they wanted practical knowledge. To contrast with that story, 2 days later, a Hungarian officer gave an excellent talk. He had served under the Soviet Union and worked extensively with the CIA until he retired. It just goes to show that cultural training can go wrong if not done properly.

Many operators stressed the importance of understanding the local population's mindset.

*OPERATOR 9*, previously military and now a private contractor, explained that knowledge of the local population can help reduce stereotyping:

[I would like] More intensive study of how the locals of particular areas think and view their place in the world. More on languages and different tribal phrases so we could identify them easier. I would have liked to know more in depth of how the locals think. What motivates them. We see them as goat farmers and only that. It would have been cool to know how they see themselves.

*OPERATOR 7*, now a private contractor, added that it is also important to know how the locals perceive operators. You would operate one way if you knew the locals were friendly, but you would approach the situation differently if you knew the locals were hostile. *OPERATOR 5* emphasized a balanced perspective from “both sides of the scope”, meaning both the operators' perception of the locals and the locals' perception of the operators.

Specific areas in which operators wanted more education included social and familial hierarchy and structure, who has the power, who to negotiate with, differences between Islamic

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

sects (such as Shia and Sunni, value, and currency. *OPERATOR 1* explained that a correct understanding of value is crucial to many elder negotiations:

Some areas, a goat is more valuable a reward than \$1,000 American. You don't want to insult or over-offer, and the CIA fucks this up all the time. We could have gotten intel faster and not alienated some groups if we had understood value better.

He clarified his "goat" comment by saying that in some areas, locals who are caught with American money can be punished by death, and it is preferable to use other types of currency or items of value.

One area where operators disagreed was language. There was about a 50/50 split between operators who believed language proficiency and even fluency was necessary for mission success and operators who thought learning the basics and relying on a translator was better. Operators who advocated language proficiency pointed out that translators and interpreters can betray them and may have hidden agendas, while operators preferred translators countered that they are often deployed to multiple areas without enough time to become fluent.

*OPERATOR 1* summarized the latter viewpoint from a command point of view:

If you are going in on a command level, I think you can't throw everything at it because what if next thing, you're in Somalia? Or the Ukraine? So you have to kind of be jack-of-all-trades but master of none, know enough to get by pretty much and know who you can turn to and who you can count on, whether they be translators or attaches.

*OPERATOR 4* held the opposite view, stating, "No amount of 'cultural study' can substitute for language mastery to at least professional working proficiency." He explained that learning a language demonstrates that the individual has "a significant grasp of the host culture". Most operators were in agreement that reading Arabic was important, especially for navigation.

Operators were also aware of the inherent difficulties of designing pre-deployment cultural training programs. *OPERATOR 1* explained that it is not always possible to adequately

train operators in cultural matters prior to deployment because they are not always certain where they will be sent:

Soldiers never know where they're going to go, so having them take a year of Arabic, what if something flares up in Russia, or the Philippines? In a perfect world, you could train everybody, give them all sufficient training, but practicality-wise there's no time, there's no money, there's no resources. When it comes to a tactical level, it's great if I have people who know the language and the culture, but if you can't shoot, and if you don't have the good sense not to get your ass shot, you're going to get me killed and I don't want you. It depends what you're going up against.

His comments illustrate that, when designing a cultural training program, it is always important to keep in mind the situations in which the training will be used. For example, practical training in elder negotiations is probably more useful to most operators than a comprehensive history of the Islamic Caliphate. However, *OPERATOR 1* also mentioned that his pre-deployment cultural training tended to be “very site-specific and op-specific”. This means that cultural training needs to be tailored according to the operator's current needs.

## Solutions

Often, the best solutions arise from considering what can be done to prevent past mistakes. Take *OPERATOR 1*'s story of his misadventure in a mosque:

This was an area that was hot as fuck, 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The afternoon call to prayer came, and we were deciding whether to stay at the base or not. Someone knew there were power lines by the mosque. One of us had the bright idea: let's go to the mosque, there's an air conditioner, we can sit in the back, and no one will notice. Well, we got there a wee bit late. There are two entrances to the mosque: women's and men's. We went into the women's...it was bad. I think we felt worse than they did. They weren't wearing veils, so we quickly put our hands over our eyes and got out of there. We went into town and spread a rumor that dumb CIA guys went into the wrong side of the mosque, that saved our asses. We were all kind of thinking with our sweat glands. The takeaway: don't go to church unless you're a regular and actually believe.

*OPERATOR 3* also had insights into past cultural mistakes:

A dead giveaway for the first special ops operators going into Afghanistan is that we wore sunglasses. All the Afghans don't wear glasses, even if they have bad vision they don't wear glasses, and they certainly don't wear sunglasses. Even if you're running around in kameez, which is the national dress of the country, sunglasses are a dead giveaway.

*OPERATOR 1*'s mistake could have easily been prevented by not "thinking with sweat glands"; however, perhaps better education about Islam in specific regions may have been helpful.

Coming from a Christian background, *OPERATOR 1* may have thought that he could sit in the back of the mosque the same way a new visitor to a church in the United States usually sits in the back. However, mosques have very different rules than churches, which *OPERATOR 1* discovered firsthand. *OPERATOR 3*'s story may have been preventable, but in order to know that Afghans don't wear sunglasses, the United States would have needed current information about the region, which they did not have because these were the first operators going in.

Based on the results of my research, I have concluded that it is not possible to construct a uniform "cultural training" program for all operators. Although several operators mentioned that

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

it would be helpful to be “on the same page” for joint operations, there are simply too many variables in each organization for a standardized training to be beneficial. When I asked *OPERATOR 3* his thoughts on a uniform “cultural training” program, he said, “I don’t think a standardized training would work because the FBI trains their way, the CIA trains their way, the Army trains their way. I don’t know if there is any benefit in combining them all because they are looking for something that appeals to their needs.”

Cultural training programs need to come from within each organization, from the operators themselves if possible. *OPERATOR 11* commented that “the boots on the ground perspective is always better than the suits on the hill perspective.” *OPERATOR 4* also mentioned that his main “cultural” problem was the United States government and its “sclerotic bureaucracy”. I noticed that some operators had resentment toward the “government” in general, believing that it had failed them by not providing adequate cultural training and not listening to their input. *OPERATOR 4* mentioned in his first interview that in order for any training to be successful, the operator has to have the desire to learn, “It cannot be a show up for class and be force-feeding situation.” Mandated politically correct cultural training designed by a bureaucrat who has never held a gun nor travelled to the cultural regions in question is more likely to elicit sarcasm and frustration from operators than a desire to learn. Cultural training needs to be practical, current, and relevant in order to be useful to them. It needs to be as close to what they will be experiencing while deployed as possible.

Overall, many operators felt that they were not adequately prepared in cultural knowledge to complete their missions successfully. However, I noticed that a common theme among them was the ability to adapt to situations and learn what was necessary to survive. Depending on their organization and expected length of deployment, operators received different

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

types of cultural training. Sometimes there was enough time to impart a substantial amount of background information on the region and people, but other times, when the mission was short or the need for deployment was imminent, operators only had the bare minimum of knowledge necessary to survive. Therefore, adaptability and initiative are crucial skills in an operator's "cultural toolkit". Culture is always changing and evolving, so even with the most relevant cultural training available, operators may still encounter surprises while deployed. Training them to respond to such surprises and learn from their environment is the best way to supplement any inadequacies or oversights in their pre-deployment cultural training.

## Parting Thoughts

One of my research goals was to measure an operator's understanding of cultural essentialism and determine how it affected their pre-deployment cultural training. At the outset, I would have believed that operators with a good understanding of cultural essentialism would have learned the most from pre-deployment cultural training. However, because most operators had experienced multiple deployments and therefore multiple waves of pre-deployment cultural training, it was difficult to assess the interaction between their understanding of cultural essentialism and the efficacy of their pre-deployment cultural training.

An important theme I noticed was that operators who possessed little to no knowledge of their target culture prior to deployment changed their views on that culture over time.

*OPERATOR 3* expressed concern that “unless our operators are given an appreciation of cultural tendencies, there is the tendency to generalize that Islam is all one...just because they are Muslim doesn't mean they are extremist.” Although it seemed that some operators did initially paint predominantly Islamic countries with a broad, generic brush, their experiences while deployed educated them and changed their views. In addition, negative experiences with locals did not negatively prejudice operators against the entire culture, though it did make them wary when interacting in the future. *OPERATOR 5* commented, “I started to gain more empathy in a few departments and started to see the humans behind the threats and evil looks and words. I am always prejudiced against people who try to kill me, but I try to keep it in perspective that not all of them are bad people. I can easily get fragged here in the states too.”

What impressed me the most during my research is how operators were able to keep a sense of humanity in their views of locals even while they were deployed to regions where many of the locals were trying to kill them. *OPERATOR 6* had the most surprising story for me. He

had previously commented that “they didn’t teach us a damn thing” when I asked about his pre-deployment cultural training. However, when I asked him to describe a mission he was particularly proud of, he chose this one:

If I had to pick one, it was when I helped patch up a young dad’s injury and assist in the delivery of his wife’s baby boy. It had a happy ending for all of us. I was able to talk with them all and keep everything calm. When it was all done, the mother was holding the boy, the father was passing out from fatigue, our Captain was lounging with three little girls on his lap making them all laugh, and I was playing with their puppy. War isn’t always hell ya know.

Of all the deployments he had experienced, the mission he was most proud of was not one where he neutralized a terrorist cell or took out a pocket of resistance in a village. Instead, the mission he chose focused on the humanity and common ground between operators and locals.

I think that this sense of humanity is crucial. Operators experience horrors and impossible decisions that most people will never be faced with, and it would be all too easy to view all locals or anyone who is different from them as “the enemy”. There are situations where, for the purposes of survival, everyone is “the enemy”. However, given the United States’ global involvement, it is crucial for operators to cultivate a positive relationship with locals if the mission allows. On a different level, it is a sign of hope for the future that an operator can look at a young man in a foreign country who probably resembles a terrorist and instead see a nervous young dad whose wife is having a baby and needs help.

## Works Cited

Fischer, Ronald.

2011 Cross-cultural Training Effects on Cultural Essentialism Beliefs and Cultural Intelligence. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35.6:767-776.

Forte, Maximilian C.

2011 The Human Terrain System and Anthropology: A Review of Ongoing Public Debates. *American Anthropologist* 113.1:149-153.