

French Practice in Getting Prepared to Overseas Operations

French forces said good-bye to their draftees and dressed themselves with the fatigues of professional soldiers by 1996. Challenge faced and met, I'd dare say, since professionalization happens to be quite a mature process by the time being. During this remarkable decade of reforms, French forces had to get familiar with overseas military commitments atypical to their usual combat operations. Hence, this newer pattern early called commanders upon consideration for education matters. Obviously, instruction and training concepts and methods needed to be revised. On this subject, the **past 1970-1996 era** credibly demonstrates that this reform is not yet complete in some aspects.

What does this era show actually? **The first-born of French professional units start facing the challenge posed by military interventions overseas, especially in Africa.** Their key-personnel tackle with the full spectrum of non-conventional warfare, including counter-guerrilla, coercion and violence-containment operations. They go diving into a myriad of cultures that are alien to their standard believes and manners. They venture on the unpaved way of instructing African forces. So, at that time, we can already see France sending a handful of “her sons” in Africa to restore peace and security, protect populations and alleviate the pains inflicted to them by ethnic wars. The lieutenants and captains of that age happen to be today's GOC's¹ committing regular forces abroad. Which operational and cultural challenges have our former professional battalions met? How have they been instructed and trained? Or, in other terms, how to learn “overseas” and operate in that environment?

As a grown-up party of regular soldiers, Army can now draw valuable answers from the questions aforementioned whilst exploring the wide field of training key-personnel to all sorts of military expeditions. Such answers can also be **referred to as a “French-style” area of expertise that quite a number of Western forces, including US forces, are still hunting for.**

The developments below mainly depict how the Army has been training professional units to the interventions applying in Africa between 1970 and 1987. These lines are to contribute in think-tanks developing on the subject of enhanced training for overseas operations, where appropriate to tactical units and courses on the one hand, and integration into senior staff-officers programs on the other hand.

Learn “overseas”

Between 1970 and 1997, Africa happened to be the main area of operations for our first-born professional units. They have noticeably³ been committed to a series of missions in Chad; also to operations such as “Lamentin” in Mauritania; “Barracuda” and “Almandin” in the Central African Republic, “Godoria” in Djibouti; “Baumier” in the former Zaire; “Onix” in Somalia; “Noroît”, “Amalys” and “Turquoise” in Rwanda; “Azalée” in the Comorian Islands; etc. **As far as key-personnel’s training is concerned, two main lessons came surfacing from these missions.**

The first one is of a tactical nature. Conventional operations, amongst which “Licorne” -in the Ivory Coast- could set a fashion, are generating newer requirements such as CMO⁴, PSYOPS and HUMINT. These functions are not the field of strategic and operational experts only. They also address combat echelons in terms of tactical skills, from the commander’s level to every squad leader. The second one is of a **cultural nature**. Awareness of the local cultures, including in their fainter aspects, is a prerequisite to achieving any missions in Africa or in whichever distant theater.

Squad and platoon leaders as well as battalion commanders engaged in such operations are to face what the *US Marine Corps* calls “the four blocks of hybrid wars⁵”. Actually, they will seamlessly gear combat operations with CMO, PSYOPS, INFO-OPS and HUMINT activities. They will also deal with civilian populations and military forces whose traditions and habits may produce a true cultural choc to them.

Self-confidence; enterprise and novelty

How could such lessons be not lectured to our commissioned and non-commissioned officers? Actually, key personnel are basing their education program for overseas and other non-conventional operations on this **cultural and tactical background**. Once they know that a mission abroad is planned for their units, all sergeants and lieutenants involved start preparing that mission day after day. Indeed, grasp of the human environment together with counter-guerrilla and violence-containment warfare would form the hub of training efforts. CMIDOM⁶ therefore integrates key-personnel from units previously committed overseas, with a view to teaching tactics and local cultures to students preparing themselves for similar missions. This is how all military virtues preached by Faidherbe, Gallieni and Lyautey keep being passed to junior generations. Namely, openmind, sense of initiative and inclination to novelty.

“Greenhorn” key-personnel start exploring various African cultures, also salient ethnic and religious groups that are known to bear on the political and social life of those countries stretching along the Western coast and in the Horn of Africa. Then, they learn how to apply this knowledge to the conduct of operations, with special attention paid to dealing with the populations and **winning “the battle for hearts”** in rebellion-affected regions. Training-support to African forces also takes an important place in education programs dedicated to non-conventional operations. Finally, students get familiarized with the natives’ ways of thinking, living and working, especially where a serious cultural adjustment to them is essential.

Lawrence of Arabia and his knife-and-soup motto

Sir Lawrence’s motto can actually respond to a number of interrogations from inexperienced officers and NCOs in the battalions. Namely, how can we translate the subtle changes of the population’s behavior into an intelligence report? How can we anticipate on and keep control over a guerrilla? How can we monitor a sector in Tropical, Saharan or Urban areas? Which tactical and technical skills should we refer to in mob-control conditions?

In a given battalion, the commander imposes that key-personnel be reading two books, *Modern war* from Roger Trinquier and *The seven pillars of wisdom* from TE Lawrence. To express what he is



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expecting from his personnel, this colonel uses to impersonate Lawrence in the following terms: “Gentlemen, you won’t eat soup with a knife”. A flash of wit that summarizes **the whole philosophy of training for overseas operations**. In the early stage of their career, junior executives should be informed of the importance of cultural and intellectual flexibility in expeditions that may require special courses of action and leadership. Actually, such operations demand that the same squad or platoon leader be capable of executing his/her combat missions together with the full spectrum of CMO, PSYOPS and HUMINT activities supporting them.

“Gentlemen, you won’t eat soup with a knife”

Acting overseas, a matter of versatility and cultural tuning

As a matter of fact, key personnel of all combat units set on training for overseas missions have been nursed out of **two major principles of action**. Be task-versatile on the one hand, and display cultural agility on the other hand.

Multi-task capability *versus* specialization

One key-requirement instructed to platoon leaders was **multi-task capability**. Always get involved locally in a forceful action altogether with information and psychological operations that can secure the population to your side and subsequently cut insurgents from their current support. That precept naturally implied that key-personnel be **qualified for a variety of tasks**. Actually, specialized functions such as CMO, PSYOPS, INFO-OPS and HUMINT were nothing but tactical deeds and the sphere of duty assigned to every squad or platoon leader servicing in a combat unit.

Consequently, versatility is now given precedence over specialization and key-personnel keep accumulating qualifications. Companies are “wandering about” in remote villages to display the information and psychology that help forge a favorable human pattern across the area of operation. Soldiers play the role of administrative agents; they dig wells; they also build roads, bridges and schools. In return to this positive image gained in the eyes of the local populations, they receive from them the very pieces of information essential for the success of their mission.

A pillar of overseas-oriented training, **versatility becomes paragon to fashioning key-personnel** for all expeditionary missions. In this context, sergeants’ and lieutenants’ familiarity with the full range of special operations is actually as important as their ability in operating organic weapons or running some traditional attack or tactics. This is why CMO, PSYOPS, INFO-OPS and HUMINT quickly materialized in every combat company’s OPORD, at paragraph “execution”. As well, a particular style of leadership starts developing in line with that education and training methodology. A feature specific to the French military culture, the wide sphere of duty **disclosed to lower tactical levels of command** is boosting self-determination and task-versatility across the Army. Indeed, this can work only where the spirit and word of the mission are clearly expressed and understood.

Some individuals are presently recommending a similar approach for the *US Marine Corps*; also for US Special Forces. General Lambert, a former SOTF Cdr, is especially calling for more versatility in land forces⁷. Kind of silent cry in a predetermined world, I would say, since **on this side of the Atlantic, established military standards are mainly oriented to specialization**. This trend is much the result of substantial human and financial resources supporting an advanced technology. Same credo keeps inspiring the US Defense Policy. In fact, DOD Secretary Rumsfeld continues generating a number of corps specialized in Intelligence, Civil Affairs, PSYOPS and INFO-OPS. Most of these branches are already supporting study roads and schools of their own and can offer a career-profile up to the rank of general officer. This said and with respect to the most recent example of Iraqi post-strike era, many flaws scored by US Forces in dealing with non-conventional operations are clearly demonstrating the limits of that system.

Conversely, the French military culture and practice aforementioned would advocate for multi-task capable key-personnel, from top down to the level of squad-leader, who could cater for CMO, PSYOPS, INFO-OPS and HUMINT in addition to combat activities. This aspect is worth being approached in schools for commissioned and non-commissioned officers as well as in colleges for senior staff-officers.

Culture is an iceberg

By 1970 to 1997, there had been a big deal making trainees aware of indigenous cultures before they got committed to overseas operations. In fact,

Other contributions to doctrinal thought

grasp of the local culture helps realize the challenges posed by those missions of assistance and training directed to foreign forces. Key-personnel involved in such missions need to **understand the iceberg-shape of culture, since genuine traditions and customs hardly come to light at a first glance.** That lesson learned still happens to be of a priceless value to junior platoon and squad leaders. To the exception of those “tribal warriors” present in some regions, African forces actually train themselves, combat and utilize courses of action and staff procedures similar to the “western” standards. Alike rules of operation, identical regulation and same pride at servicing for the nation are but forming the visible portion of the iceberg named “culture”. Below the waterline, there still exist soldiers and key-personnel who keep wavering between tradition and modernity. Loyalty to some clan, ethnic group or religious party may hence rapidly dispute obedience to the established state authorities. **Non-natives can hardly perceive the roots of ancestral traditions** although these are definitively fashioning mentality and manners.

This is why our instructors were so much insisting that students understand their future cultural environment and realize that some fragile alliances might randomly fluctuate, decline or break down

without notice. Key-personnel returning from a mission-tour came depicting one or the other facet of the “iceberg”. They clearly put the light upon those cultural gaps existing between the European and the African military. One telling how some Tibesti warlord shot a bullet at an insolent lieutenant from another clan, right in his head. Another expressing his surprise when he saw his Mauritanian counterpart, a company commander from the river region, paying respects to his lieutenant who was but the son of a powerful Moorish family from the North. Such real-life reports to key-personnel planted the scene **so that the audience could realize how cultural agility is crucial to achieving any missions overseas.**

So, military success overseas is much a matter of insight into those regional cultures, traditions, beliefs and myths which are knitting the social and mental pattern in the AOO. To that extent, it is essential that some “meaningful silences” be also perceived. For example, between 1970 and 1997, our first regular troops had to make for many unvoiced angers and desires whilst carrying counter-guerilla missions or training local forces. Eventually, tactical skills and open-mindedness to foreign cultures should form the core duo of any instruction process oriented to the projection of forces.



US ARMY

Quick projection beyond the own territory keeps being the field of qualified, professional units. Swift execution secures the success of conventional operations developing in coercion and violence-containment activities. **It is expected from military leaders, especially “green juniors” that they can respond with promptitude and pertinence to the letter and the spirit of the mission assigned to them.** Thus, they will be responsible for meeting the level of excellence ordered to them in the full spectrum of combat, HUMINT, CMO, INFO-OPS and PSYOPS activities. A very demanding goal, excellence in all domains and at all levels entails that the whole training process be versatility-oriented and apply in the same way from squad-leaders up to the Bn TF Commander. Positive effects of the system materialize immediately in the field. Lower combat echelons can carry on complex activities that progressively bring reluctant or even hostile populations to a more cooperative attitude. Ultimately, these troops will get from them the crucial information required for preventing/resolving chaos situations.

The subject of tactical and technical skills specific to non-conventional operations is really worth forming **the background of programs issued for officers and NCOs scholarship as well as for senior staff-officers colleges.** Such programs should also be lectured to key-personnel within combat units in order to help them get into the picture of potential theaters of operation. To that extent, EMSOME (see footnote 6 at page 1) stands for the best Army’s winning card.

Where instructing foreign cultures and the species of tactics for non-conventional operations have been modeling professional units during the 1970-1997 era, their key-personnel have developed leadership-virtues essential to professional military. I mean self-confidence, personal rationale and inclination to novelty. The juniors of that time have been further on assigned higher responsibilities but, whichever the duty was, **they could still feel the good of their prime initiation to overseas and other non-conventional operations.** Recent events occurring in Darfour, Congo and the Ivory Coast indicate testify that Africa might become the field of French land forces again by the next decade, either for nationally or multinationally led operations. In either case Army junior key-personnel will have to **tackle with the very challenges met by their predecessors.**

1 General Officers Commanding.

2 Colonel (Retired) Henri Boré lives in the United States. He is working as consultant for US agencies running African forces dedicated assistance and training programs.

3 Reference: “From Bizerte to Sarajevo”, released by the Overseas Forces Committee (Lavauzelle 1995) and Expeditionary operation files, published in the “Ancre d’or review” by September 2005.

4 Civil-Military Operations. NATO equivalent: Civil-Military Cooperation.

5 In “Future Warfare: the Rise of Hybrid Wars”, General James N. Mattis & Lieutenant Colonel Frank G. Hoffman, editorial published in the Proceedings review by November 2005.

6 CMIDOM stands for “Military information and documentation center for overseas operations”. Once transferred from Versailles to Rueil-Malmaison, this center was renamed “Military specialization school for overseas and foreign areas of operations” (EMSOME in French).

7 “Best balance between special and conventional forces”, Inside the Army, 28 November 2005.

8 Note of the translator: Col Henri Boré actually used a more generic term “occidental”.