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The iSoldier: How the Army Can Capitalize on Technologically Savvy Troops

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Upon arriving in Iraq as a stout 18 year old in March 2003, I was well-versed in the tactics associated with being a Military Police (MP) soldier. I knew how to respond to ambushes and perform evasive maneuvers if caught in a skirmish. I could instantaneously react to any potential nuclear, biological, or chemical attack. And I knew the Rules of Engagement directed by the Army through and through.

Yet, I had no knowledge of Islam nor understood the difference between Shi'a, Sunnis and Kurds. I couldn't explain the significance of the twin mosques in Karbala. I had no idea that showing the heel of your shoe is considered to be very offensive in the Arab culture. The culture shock was indescribable. This not only made the task of providing local security and training to Iraqi police more difficult, but also inadvertently added to the growing resentment of the American presence. By now, the service men and women of the US military are privy to being on the ground. In lieu of the shifting strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, I wonder how better prepared and culturally competent the average soldier marine and sailor is today, than when I was on the ground nearly six years ago?

Since leaving the military, I have had the opportunity earn a college degree, as well as work in the national security environment in Washington DC. The experience has enabled me to notice the systemic malfunction in terms of cultural awareness training. Though there is a binary understanding of the need to improve such skill levels, most of the focus and literature is consumed and matriculated at the top-level senior, and slowly growing, junior officer level. Yet, there is currently a lack of any formal, centralized and joint cultural curriculum for the majority of the force. This is especially relevant to the 18-25 year old junior enlisted soldiers. These are the folks who need to be considered when discussing the implementation of effective counterinsurgency strategy.

The need for cultural awareness - the ability to see beyond one's own cultural inhibitions and develop understanding of a particular place and people - has since been acknowledged as critical to success on today's battlefield. There has been significant improvement with regard to language and cultural familiarization by offering access to Mobile Training Teams, Video Tele-Training, Language Survival Kits, and additional online instructional manuals and college level courses. Without a doubt, these tools have significantly helped units properly prepare for the areas that they will soon be operating. Yet despite the access to such ad hoc training opportunities, commanders are still stressed to meet various obligations prior to deploying.

The simple fact of the matter is warfighting prowess necessarily takes precedence over cultural awareness training. For a commander, there is only so much time in a day for training before deployment. Soldiers already have to devote countless hours to scheduled ranges, courses and suicidal awareness training to include many other combat readiness obligations. The high operational tempo only adds to such a stressful schedule. Moreover, even in cases where a commander can address cultural awareness, there is no centralized system to ensure a metric for success for long-term learning.

Though the most recent release of military doctrine states that, the “Army seeks to develop an ability to understand and work with a culture for its Soldiers and leaders,” and provides a rubric for proficiency in both “cross-cultural-competency” and “regional competence,” no methods are provided to the leader for how to reach such ends.

In order to provide a successful, long-lasting cultural awareness training curriculum, the Department of Defense should appropriate funding that supports a two-pronged approach. First, the U.S. military should compile cultural curriculum in micro-correspondence courses accessible through soldiers’ Army Knowledge Online account (correspondingly with the other services as well), which every soldier has access to for email, records, and daily forums. Similar to the correspondence courses already in existence, these micro-courses would focus on culturally pertinent information—regional, national, and provincial-- that a soldier would need to know about an area that they will be operating. The curriculum associated with the testing, would give a soldier a foundation to build on and improve in order to reach the prescribed level of competence.

Second, the Army should develop and issue a personal PDA device – iTough, a variant of the Apple Company’s iTouch, to every soldier in the ranks. This tool would be combat efficient, and be an essential component of a soldiers battledress. Soldiers could download traditional and cultural correspondence courses on the go, as well as language training and podcasts. There could even be capability to download and keep track of PT tests and other training proficiency through a secured system, as well as a section to take notes necessary for drafting situational reports. This enhances accountability, and makes it easier for NCOs to screen and keep track of a soldier’s overall performance, evaluate their potential for promotion, and make the counseling process more efficient. In turn, such supervision will extend an obligation to the soldier to use the device often, and add competitiveness amongst others in the unit.

In the end, time can be saved and not infringe upon a commanders daunting schedule. However any additional leader time not filled can easily be compensated with the simple order, “break out your iTough.” Anyone who has gone through basic training knows that being told to “break out an iTough,” would be far more appealing than the classic “break out your Smart Book...” Nonetheless, expanding a more centralized, formal and joint curriculum through the AKO system, as well as fielding such a device will assist in the time constraints indebted to a commander and properly address the training needed on an irregular battlefield.

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