

The Olmsted Foundation Scholarship Opportunity

A dormant giant allowed to slumber

by Col John C. McKay, USMC(Ret)

The George and Carol Olmsted Foundation, properly The Olmsted Foundation (<http://www.olmstedfoundation.org>), offers singularly unique scholarships to Service-recommended U.S. active duty junior officers. Olmsted scholars are regular officers of the Marine Corps, Army, Navy, and the Air Force who have completed at least three years of commissioned service, but not more than 11 years of total active military service at time of selection. Each year, selected officers are afforded the unparalleled opportunity to study in a foreign language at a foreign university. The Foundation's perspective and purpose are focused. Singularity is born of language proficiency and cultural immersion, a dearth of which is extant in the United States generally and in the U.S. armed forces specifically. True, the U.S. Government does have language training programs for myriad positions, including within DOD. Those programs are neither all-encompassing nor definitive; nor are breadth and scope profound. Further, they can also be but marginally effective. Olmsted Foundation scholarships stand distinctly apart from all other postgraduate education programs offered by DOD. The Olmsted Foundation's program inculcates language proficiency and attendant cultural understanding—vice merely appreciation or cursory familiarity. The

>Col McKay enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1962. He deployed with First Field Artillery Group (1st FAG), Force Troops, Fleet Marine Force Pacific in response to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. He received a SECNAV appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy in 1964. He served two tours in Vietnam. He was wounded twice. He was selected as an Olmsted Scholar in 1973 and studied two years in Spain. He subsequently commanded 1st Bn, 9th Marines; then JTF-160 in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. He has served with a national intelligence agency, the Department of State, and Department of Justice (DOJ) since retirement.

Foundation provides junior military officers a compelling basis on which to build a lifetime's worth of language proficiency and cultural awareness



MG George Olmsted. (Photo from Wikimedia.org)

otherwise available only to those born and reared in a foreign country. The resultant strategic value for the country and its armed services of such a cadre of qualified officers is incalculable. GEN George Olmsted's astute prescience in creating the George Olmsted Foundation is ever more evident in today's world than when he established it in 1959.

It is incumbent upon the Marine Corps to maximize the strategic potential of the Olmsted Foundation's program. For the Marine Corps to do so the following recommendations require implementation:

- The Commandant of the Marine Corps provides unequivocal top-down command guidance and support for the Olmsted Foundation program. An appropriate venue would be during General Officers' Symposia.
- Again, emanating from senior USMC leadership, a focused understanding, application, and exploitation of the strategic importance and

pragmatism of fully utilizing Olmsted scholarship officers.

- Address the misperception on the part of many junior officers and their superiors that participation in the Olmsted Foundation program lacks career relevance.
- The imperative for Corps-wide recognition of the strategic implications of having a cadre of officers intimately familiar with foreign languages and cultures.
- Marine Corps recognition that many of the United States' strategic and operational miscalculations since WWII, and most certainly leading up to, during, and since the Vietnam War, could have been attenuated, possibly even avoided, through an in-depth knowledge of protagonists'—actual or potential—language, culture, and history.¹

- Ensure that the USMC selection of Olmsted scholars is a clear, distinct, independent and separately managed program and process.

The power of language is unequivocal. Fluency in a foreign language, or languages, exponentially augments that power. It behooves senior USMC leadership to understand that language does not merely describe; it encapsulates meaning and centrally shapes human experience and action. The United States has historically and traditionally eschewed the serious study of foreign language. So too, in the main, have the country's armed services given short shrift to this requisite. There have been some efforts, short of duration and poorly focused, to address the discrepancy. To wit, in 1906 and the 1930s, the U.S. Marine Corps did give attention to language—Chinese and Spanish, respectively—due to the exigencies of the moment rather than recognition of universality.² French language training for officers was also instituted in the 1920s and taught through the early 1930s. The fact remains that such efforts were *ex post facto* following the China Relief Expedition–Boxer Rebellion (1900); interventions in the Caribbean Sea and Central America (1899–1930); and WWI. Since the end of WWII, and inexorably in today's multilinked, globalized world, with the surge of Islamic



We can't afford to allow language capability to atrophy. Language skills are perishable; we can't afford to be unprepared for the future. (Photo by SSgt Richard Blumenstein.)

fundamentalism, the United States is disadvantaged through a dearth of civilian and military leadership knowledgeable in the nuances of and implicit logic conveyed through foreign language. This is not surprising. In the United States, military education has traditionally been linked to developments in civilian education, with both the pluses and minuses of such linkage. Cultures and the societies emanating from them are complex systems in which endogenous forces and tensions are constantly at play. The challenge of at least partially unraveling such complexities rests within the thorough knowledge of a society's language, thus in its culture. Absent language fluency and cultural intimacy, one engages protagonists at a decided disadvantage.

The United States military deludes itself on several fronts *vis-à-vis* the learning of foreign languages. The overwhelming presence in today's world of the English dialect engenders, both in terms of potential audience and global cachet, a hubris borne of complacency. Faith in current language training arrangements wherein designated officers are trundled off to various institutions is delusive, as is the belief that mastering grammar and vocabulary constitutes learning to speak a foreign language. There is the (almost) ever-present Amer-

ican accent. Slang and colloquialisms are rarely, if ever, covered in language training institutions; and, if they are, both require almost daily exposure to be grasped and properly utilized not to mention they are ever-changing dynamic entities. All peoples strew their native language with a conglomeration of speech that appears in no dictionary, travel guidebook, or simply is not translatable. The U.S. military Services think that a foreign language can be *learned* through expensive—and frankly speaking, superficial—processes and programs that all but eschew the subtleties and implications of how people choose words and express themselves. The result is that we as a Nation are stunningly ignorant of others' histories, cultures, languages, grievances, and anxieties with more than a tranche of self-righteousness thrown in.

Further compounding the challenge of a lack of foreign language proficiency and fluency is the national decline of international studies. As pointed out by Charles King in a *Foreign Affairs* article last year, "In October 2013, the U.S. Department of State eliminated its funding program for advanced language and cultural training on Russia and the former Soviet Union."³ In essence, the fiscal climate gutted the U.S. Department of State's Program

for Research and Training on Eastern Europe and the Independent States of the Former Soviet Union (Title VIII). Ironically, that decision came just one month before the commencement of a now well-known chain of events: the Euromaidan revolution within the Ukraine, annexation of Crimea by Russia, and deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations to a point not matched since the Cold War.⁴ King goes on to note that given lobbying by universities and scholarly associations, Title VIII was partially resuscitated earlier in 2015, but at less than half its previous funding level with future appropriations problematic. Additionally, King notes:

After a steady expansion over two decades, enrollment in foreign-language courses at U.S. colleges fell by 6.7 percent between 2009 and 2013. Most language programs experienced double-digit losses. Even Spanish—a language chosen by more U.S. students than all other languages combined—has suffered its first decline since the Modern Language Association began keeping count in 1958. Today the third most studied language in U.S. higher education, behind Spanish and French, is a homegrown one: American Sign Language.⁵

One cannot help but reflect on why Russian, Arabic, and Chinese language teaching, among a host of others, are apparently being allowed to atrophy. That a similar situation occurs within the U.S. military is debatable though the decrease in availability of these courses in civilian institutions of higher learning does not bode well for the long-term efforts of the U.S. military to address the paucity of truly accomplished linguistic line officers. An aside, but indicative of an awareness among a segment of the U.S. population, the importance of learning a second language was recently reported in *The Wall Street Journal* wherein it is stated, “... schools that immerse students in a second language have become hot destinations for parents seeking a leg up for their children in a global economy.”⁶ GEN Olmsted recognized, and the Olmsted Foundation recognizes, that point relevant to strategic and operational study, practice, and application.

Further muddling the situation is the noted decrease of foreign language utilization amongst U.S. academic researchers. The annual College of William and Mary survey reflects only 30 percent of American researchers in the field (international studies) claim they have a working knowledge of no language other than English, and more than half say that they rarely or never cite non-English sources in their work.⁷ An Olmsted scholar who has applied himself does not suffer from this deficit.

Social life within U.S. Embassies is conformist and restrictive, a caricature of the mores and manners, with diplomatic trappings, of the Nation. In instances of foreign language utilization—linguistically fluent U.S. personnel notwithstanding—the U.S., including its military services, has taken the easy way out as more and more of the world is working in English. The vast majority of U.S. military officers are monoglots; they have but a murky idea of the difficulty involved in mastering a foreign language. Absent an acute crisis or actual wartime, the U.S. military is not accustomed to seriously considering long-term language inundation for its officer corps; and, unfortunately, the Marine Corps is not exempt. It is arguable whether current U.S. military

language training has much progressed beyond what then-BGen Richard M. Lake stated on 10 September 2008 before the House Armed Service Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations: “... some units and individuals don’t receive as much training in areas to include language as some commanders desire.”⁸ Conversely, violent adversaries such as ISIS have little intent of following today’s trend of adopting English—though their English-language propaganda reflects a level of sophistication and effectiveness—as the preferred means of communication for the envisaged caliphate. Quite the opposite. North Korea offers another sample of such thinking; and, in ways quite subtle, so does Communist China. It behooves our country’s military, especially the USMC, given its size, structure, history, and today’s missions, to focus on selecting officers of high standing to focus on serious language, cultural, and geographic historiography learning. Plausible arguments can be made that the misguided, little understood, in-earnest entry of the United States into the Vietnam conflict, and subsequently into the imbroglio of the Middle East, were predicated in no small part by a scarcity of linguist proficiency and culture familiarity in addition to a



Being able to speak a foreign language opens doors to better understanding of cultural nuances important in establishing credible personal relationships. (Photo by SSgt Richard Blumenstein.)

paucity of regional historical appreciation. International dynamics are ever changing. Institutional challenges are subject, if not respondent, to societal continuums. On the other hand, fighting and winning wars has a constancy of “ends and means.” Mastery of foreign languages and the concomitant knowledge of foreign cultures serve as both an ends and means in being able to successfully prosecute and prevail in the international arena, whether in war or interstate rivalry.

Cynics notwithstanding, irregular warfare as experienced in the Vietnam conflict was not a one-off affair. Nor can it be plausibly argued that U.S. involvement in that avoidable misadventure was predicated on a judicious understanding of the cultural milieu from which emerged the First Indochina War followed by U.S. involvement. Another legacy of that war bleeds over into contemporary times. The United States has been in a state of war since 9/11, denied but ever evident. The all-volunteer force, another legacy of the Vietnam era, has served to all but isolate U.S. citizenry from the obligations of military service. As a consequence, the U.S. public likes its heroes sanitized, perhaps especially in uncertain times like the present.⁹ Further, like a postmodern Praetorian Guard, it can be plausibly argued that our Special Operations Force practitioners don’t serve at the will of the American people.¹⁰

The unique singularity and suitability of the Olmsted Program for today’s evolving and increasingly uncertain world lies not in it being merely another graduate-level program for Marine Corps officers; rather it is in its universal, ever more evident applicability to the evolving and uncertain world. Distinct from other of the U.S. military’s language familiarization and higher academic programs, the Olmsted Foundation provides for immersion in a foreign language and culture, an unsurpassed exposure to regional intricacies and politics, and active participation in an unequalled educational and socialization experience. The judicious Marine Corps officer thus exposed is thenceforth in the incomparable position to solely provide the ever-essential

understanding of foreign complexities so lacking since WWII. GEN Olmsted, with unparalleled prescience and foresight, understood this.

The Olmsted Foundation program adroitly maneuvers around those facets of higher academic study of language and international relations that have experienced a shift of focus. The Foundation continues to offer an unsurpassed means of educating U.S. military officers in the nuances of effective relations between peoples of differing backgrounds, languages, and cultures. By the same token, the Marine Corps is obligated to maximize its efforts in identifying and recommending outstanding officers for the Olmsted program. Given the uniqueness of the program and the singular potential of Olmsted scholars for the country and the Corps, the internal USMC selection process for the Program needs to be modified. First, selection for and assignment to the Olmsted Foundation’s program has to be divorced from the Commandant’s Career-Level Education Board/Career Professional Intermediate Board (CCLEB/CPIB). Selecting outstanding officers for the Olmsted Foundation’s scholarship program under the purview of the CCLEB/CPIB is not unlike mixing apples and oranges. Second, USMC applicants for the Olmsted scholarship program need to be given a window of three years during which they can apply and be considered. Third, the mandatory requirement for an officer to be selected for and complete company grade professional military education remains extant. The current USMC policy on Olmsted scholars of “one shot and you’re done” is both counterproductive and unfair to the Marine Corps and to potential Olmsted scholars. The current policy constricts the meaningful contribution to the country and to the Marine Corps *vis-à-vis* what an Olmsted scholar offers. And, fourth, the Marine Corps must institutionalize a long-term, effective, and efficient process by which Olmsted scholars are tracked throughout their careers. Again, the dividends of the latter are all but self-evident in terms of in-depth strategic and operational cache.

The Marine Corps stands to benefit immeasurably, as does the country, by

adopting a realistic and functionally efficient policy of recognizing the unique utility—in strategic and operational terms—of a cadre of Olmsted scholars. In order to do so, the Corps must tailor their Olmsted scholar selection, scholar utilization, and tracking process accordingly. To do otherwise is not in the best interest of the United States Marine Corps nor is it in the best interest of the country it so faithfully serves.

Notes

1. J.C. McKay, “The Enlightened Study of War: Foreign Language and History,” *Military Review: The Professional Journal of the U.S. Army*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, July/August 2016), 102–107.
2. Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., *Soldiers of the Sea*, (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute Press, 1962), 165, 287.
3. Charles King, “The Decline of International Studies: Why Flying Blind is Dangerous,” *Foreign Affairs*, (New York: July/August 2015), 88–98.
4. *Ibid.*, 88.
5. *Ibid.*, 92.
6. Janet Adamy, “Dual Language Classes a Big Draw,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (New York: 2–3 April 2016), Section A.
7. *Ibid.*, 92.
8. Statement of BGen Richard M. Lake, Director of Intelligence and Senior Language Authority, HQMC, before the House Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations on 10 September 2008, Concerning United States Marine Corps Foreign Language and Cultural Awareness Efforts, accessed at <http://fao.nps.edu>. See also Will Bardenwerper, “For Military, Slow Progress in Foreign Language Push,” *The New York Times*, (New York: 21 September 2008), Section A. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com>.
9. Matt Gallagher, “Welcome to the Age of Commando,” *The New York Times*, (New York: 31 January 2016), Sunday Review, 7.
10. *Ibid.*

