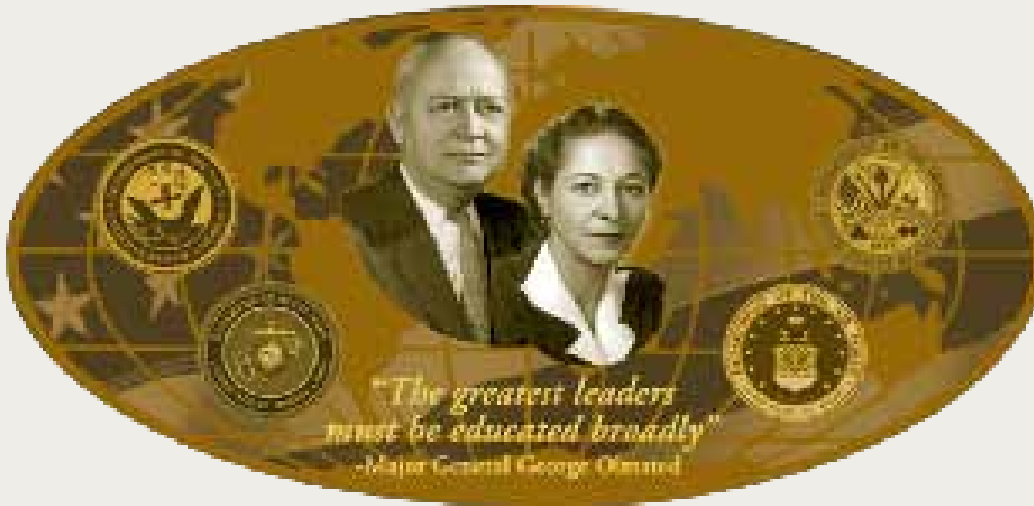


UNCONVENTIONAL EDUCATION: SOF OFFICERS AND THE OLMSTED FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP



By Major Lino Miani and Lieutenant Commander Michael Wisecup

Since the earliest missions of the Office of Strategic Services in Europe and south Asia, America's special-operations forces, or SOF, have gone beyond their conventional counterparts in pursuit of the language and cultural abilities that will give them an edge in warfare. We leverage this capability as a force multiplier, making our impact greater than the sum of our small numbers and doing so in strategically significant ways. These abilities made it possible for the Jedburghs to avoid the pitfalls of Free French politics during World War II, bonded MACV-SOG commandos to their Nung and Montagnard teammates in Vietnam, and enabled SOF in Kurdistan and Anbar Province, Iraq, to secure the approaches to Baghdad.

In today's environment of globalized conflict, the need for such skills has never been greater. SOF are routinely deployed in an estimated 75 countries around the world, where they encounter hundreds of languages and cultures. Soldiers working in small elements within these environments require mature diplomatic skills and expertise in liaison that can be acquired only through time and exposure to other cultures. SOF operators have proven adept at developing a vital

understanding of regional dynamics through years of security assistance, combined operations and unconventional warfare.

It can take a decade or more for SOF professionals to achieve the easy understanding of regional dynamics that distinguishes us from our conventional counterparts. Unfortunately, an ever-expanding list of career milestones, service and joint education, and staff assignments limit the time and opportunities SOF officers have for developing such an intimate relationship with foreign cultures. In many cases, their actual time on the ground is relegated to fewer than five years spread over a 20-year career. The cultural exposure they do receive is gleaned from traditional intelligence products, packed into short missions in theater, or compiled from the experiences of other team members. We should do more to develop our future leaders.

Attendance at service war colleges, where officers are surrounded by peers with very similar political, cultural and military experiences, is intended to deepen, rather than broaden the education of SOF leaders. While this education is important, it is not enough for leaders of unconventional units. The success of our missions is

rooted in understanding the culture, language, history and foreign affairs of nations throughout the world, yet our education in these areas is packed into short operational tours. It is ironic that the SOF community, which prides itself on understanding the strategic consequences of every decision, fails to give more attention to this aspect of our professional education.

Language and cultural understanding have long been tenets of the SOF community and give us an edge in comparison to our conventional counterparts. Recognizing the value of these abilities, the Department of Defense approved the Defense Language Transition Roadmap, or DLTR, in January 2005. Despite its name, the plan goes beyond language proficiency to include military-wide provisions for understanding a broader range of regional social dynamics. In short, it gives DoD the task of converting its members into a force of culturally savvy internationalists.

The first and most important goal of the DLTR is to "create foundational language and regional area expertise" within DoD.¹ This is no small task. The Pentagon seeks to achieve, across all branches of service, an understanding of regional nuances that can take SOF professionals an entire career

of foreign-internal-defense, security-assistance and unconventional-warfare missions to fully understand. At the heart of this ambitious goal are three subtasks that indicate the high importance given to this initiative by DoD:

- 1) Exploit “study abroad” opportunities to facilitate language acquisition.
- 2) Establish the requirement that junior officers complete language training.
- 3) Make foreign-language ability a criterion for general officer/flag officer advancement.

Though these three tasks focus on language acquisition, the methods include one-year assignments for junior officers “with a foreign military or national constabulary/paramilitary force” — a bold break from the conventional military’s traditional lockstep approach to officer development.

OLMSTED SCHOLAR PROGRAM

In many ways, the vision of creating a force of culturally aware and internationally minded Soldiers is new to the conventional military, but the concept is not. Inspired by his experiences in China during World War II, during which he witnessed the difficulties faced by American officers unfamiliar with other cultures, Major General George Olmsted created the George and Carol Olmsted Foundation in 1957 to accomplish the same goal set forth in the DLTR almost 50 years later.

A successful international businessman before and after the war, Olmsted knew well how to train American officers to be effective in what he recognized as an increasingly interconnected world. The first six selectees for the Olmsted Scholar Program began their overseas studies in 1959. Among the 486 scholars who have entered the program since, 31 have become general/flag officers, including four who achieved four-star rank. Those officers later commanded the U.S. Central Command, the U.S. Strategic Command, the Air Force Materiel Command and one served as the chief of naval operations.² Drawing upon their experiences as Olmsted scholars, these officers leveraged their

unique skills while serving in positions that required close interaction with our country’s allies.

The Olmsted Scholar Program provides military officers from all services an opportunity to pursue a master’s degree abroad and includes a budget for language training, tuition and regional travel, so scholars can get a firsthand appreciation of the broad dynamics that affect their host country. By virtue of being military officers involved in a highly selective academic program, Olmsted scholars are able to associate with an incredible cross-section of their host societies. They build relationships with their host nation’s academic and security communities, government ministers, business leaders, the international diplomatic corps and even royalty. One scholar in Paris during the 1960s was a classmate and friend of Alain Richard. Their relationship became strategically important



Major General George Olmsted

when Richard became the French minister of defense in 1997. The story is not unique. Olmsted scholars develop lifelong personal relationships with their host-nation peers, personal links that are unattainable through any other education program for military officers. As these same peers rise in importance in political, military and business circles, they create a potential for greater understanding and direct lines of communication between their countries and the United States.

Though one of the stated goals of the Olmsted Scholar Program is to “increase [scholar] sensitivity to viewpoints, cultures and concerns of people around the world,”³ scholars are discouraged from “going native.” On the contrary (perhaps more importantly), the experience teaches the *limits* of cultural awareness. While living overseas as visiting officers, Olmsted scholars quickly learn what they should and should not compromise on. By understanding how to operate within the constraints of their host nation’s culture, scholars develop effective ways to counter common misperceptions about America and American culture. They are often asked hard questions concerning American foreign

policy and regularly find themselves in classrooms led by social fundamentalists. In that environment, they quickly mature into better advocates for the country and the military, a skill set that becomes more valuable as they are entrusted with increasing responsibility for our foreign policy.

WHY OLMSTED IS GOOD FOR SOF

The Olmsted Scholar Program embeds officers in the academic and social fabric of countries in strategically important regions of the world and offers a number of benefits to the SOF community. Some are obvious: the acquisition of a foreign language, cultural awareness and a familiarity with the city, country and region where the scholar lives. But the more subtle benefits of long-term exposure to a community are what really set the Olmsted Scholar Program apart and make it attractive to SOF.

The Olmsted program removes the officer from the mainstream of military education and thought, places him in an unfamiliar civilian environment, and provides him little or no direction or interference. That pushes the individual to exercise his mind, challenge his perceptions and assumptions, and be engaged daily by his classmates, professors and neighbors. The result is completion of a master’s degree, near expert language skills and the acquisition of a deep cultural understanding. No other program offers this to military officers who, for the most part, receive advanced education through service colleges and university programs in the United States.

In much of the world, past and present collide in a way that is often difficult for outsiders to fully grasp. Many of the conflicts that America finds itself involved in today have played out continuously for hundreds of years. Cultures have been built around these conflicts, and in some cases, the actors involved in the origins of the dispute are still at the center of controversy. What we sometimes fail to realize is that the U.S. is fortunate to have had the same two neighbors with roughly the same borders and the same politics for the better part of 200 years. We value nation-states and the sovereignty represented by lines on a map, and we have little understanding of those who would rather relive past conflicts than move forward together in

a positive way. To fully understand history's impact on a society, one must go beyond simply knowing its history and strive to understand the connection of that community's current leaders to the past.

There are only two ways for an American really to come to terms with this. One is through the relentless pursuit of academic expertise, but most special operators distrust those who learn only from books, as most of us prefer to learn by experience. Intelligence summaries are designed to partially satisfy our need for background understanding, but with so much information to absorb, they can become mere abstractions — meaningless lists of names, places and dates that most commanders cannot possibly grasp in time to effectively fine-tune their operations.

The second way for an American to “place the names with the faces,” so to speak, is to be immersed in the targeted environment — to learn by observation and be forced to face the intersecting impacts of history, culture, language, race and geography on daily life.

Over the course of a career, military officers will have many opportunities to learn about the places they serve in, but only the Olmsted Scholar Program offers the unique opportunity to pursue academic expertise while immersed in the culture. The combination is a powerful tool when one considers the complexity of the SOF imperatives and realizes that “understand the operational environment, recognize political implications and consider long-term effects,” is easier said than done.

WHY SOF IS GOOD FOR OLMSTED

SOF officers are uniquely suited for the Olmsted Foundation scholarship. A typical SOF operator's experiences of moving in and out of foreign countries, navigating embassy bureaucracy and understanding the regional and global contexts of the people with whom they come into contact are unmatched. Olmsted scholars are able to separate themselves from the American infrastructure in their host countries and immerse themselves with relative ease in a way that few others can. SOF officers are often given great freedom of movement in and around their host region because they are better equipped than most to avoid the threats posed

by foreign intelligence, terrorists and criminals. While in country, many SOF scholars tailor their academic efforts to coincide with the regional orientation of their parent unit. These officers are likely to seize opportunities for study and seek relationships that will benefit their units in very specific ways in the immediate future. For these reasons and more, SOF officers tend to get far more from the Olmsted Scholar Program than their conventional peers.

Additionally, most young SOF officers have direct experience with the factors that shape decisions at the operational and strategic levels. Their perspective is unmatched precisely because they've borne the brunt of those decisions time and again without the buffer of several layers of command that shelter their peers in conventional units. Because of this, SOF officers in the Olmsted Scholar Program can provide an unparalleled view of events as they unfold in strategic locations around the globe. For example, the authors of this article had front-row seats for the 12th Malaysian general election — and the series of riots surrounding it — in March 2008, as well as the Mumbai terror attacks in November of the same year. In 2006, another SOF scholar was studying in Bangkok during the Thai army's coup d'état. Meanwhile, scholars in Cairo and Tel Aviv live at the intersection of war, insurgency and U.S. Middle East policy.

LIVING THE SOF IMPERATIVES

Reflecting on his own experience as an international businessman, financier and facilitator of American foreign policy both during and after World War II, Olmsted believed that the best leaders must be educated broadly. Having masterminded OSS prisoner-rescue operations in China during the war,⁴ he understood the value of special operations and may have had them in mind when he conceived the Olmsted Scholar Program.

In an age of instant communications and 24-hour news cycles, future conflicts will assume more of the information-warfare aspects of insurgency and counterinsurgency than were seen in the large-scale, conventional warfare of the past. In such an environment, special operations forces will play a much greater role than our small numbers would otherwise suggest. Among all the orga-

nizations that make up the vast U.S. military, the U.S. Special Operations Command and its components stand to benefit immediately and directly by sending selected officers through the Olmsted Scholar Program. We cannot wait for our officers to accumulate multiple tours of duty before they learn to leverage the social and cultural aspects of the theater of war to our advantage. The Olmsted Scholar Program represents a unique opportunity, not only to gain regional expertise but also to cultivate a mindset of accomplishment through indirect or unconventional means. **SW**

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NOTES

¹Department of Defense, Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2005), 3.

²General John P. Abizaid, CENTCOM; General George Lee Butler, STRATCOM; General Henry V. Michelio, AFMC; and Admiral Carlisle A. Trost, CNO.

³The George and Carol Olmsted Foundation, “Summary of the Olmsted Scholar Program,” available online at: <http://www.olmstedfoundation.org/olmsted/web/index.cfm?view=scholarsProgram/vwMain&entID=11>.

⁴Howard L. Dutkin, *Soldier, Patriot, Financier: A Biographical Sketch of Major General George Olmsted* (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1971), 102, 109 passim.