Thinking Beyond the First Mile:

A Look at Interpreters on Combat Logistics Patrols

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SGT J. SAAD

In his 2003 book *Applied Economics,* renowned Stanford University economist Thomas Sowell concludes that politicians habitually fail to look beyond the immediate effects of their economic policies to the long-term repercussions.

"Most thinking stops at stage one," Sowell writes. "Many of the 'unintended consequences' of policies and programs would have been foreseeable from the outset if the process had been analyzed in terms of the desirability of the goals they proclaim."

This essay is not about economics or politics. It is about an asset that is slowly trickling into Army units in theater — translator aides — known simply by their military occupational specialty, 09L. This article is also about the apparent disconnect that exists between the strategic level and the operational level — the most critical piece of the puzzle — where this asset is employed.

More succinctly, here's one example of how we used our linguist outside of full-spectrum operations, outside any real guidelines, and how necessary it was to think beyond stage one in order to do so.

When SGT J.Saad (name abbreviated for operational security concerns) walked into the motor pool of Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 116th Infantry at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, in 2007, it seemed like a prayer had been answered.

Tasked with providing convoy security throughout Al Anbar Province, a 30,000-square-mile-area west of Ramadi that borders Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, our National Guard light infantry unit would have the same unfettered access to the arsenal of our active duty counterparts.

The impact was immediate. Saad, a National Guard Soldier, quickly put together a cultural briefing, specifically tailored to Multi National Force – West, that had a sense of freshness and authenticity unmatched in previous presentations. It's important to note that not only was he fluent in Arabic, but he held a doctorate in American government and public policy and was a former college professor. As expected, his presentation skills were impressive.

PFC Sarah De Boise

A Soldier and his interpreter speak with an Iraqi security guard during a mission in Mosul.

Unfortunately, unlike other Army weapons, SGT Saad did not come with an instruction manual on how to be used during combat logistics patrols (CLPs). If the unit were tasked with developing relationships with local sheiks, imams or politicians, his role would be obvious. The question left – what now?

Even in 2002, forward-thinking officers, such as MAJ Paul Schmitt, were posing the same question without satisfactory answers.

"Small unit commanders and leaders in an engagement area are often the ones most in need of interpreters, but also often the ones who have the least idea of how to use them properly," Schmitt wrote for *Infantry Magazine* while assigned to the Department of Foreign Languages at the U.S. Military Academy.

Clearly, it was time to think beyond stage one. With few exceptions, the evidence provided is anecdotal. A forensic look at this article might reveal fatal flaws in the logic and conclusion. If nothing else, though, perhaps this field research will offer another view. That said, here's what we learned.

Interpreters: The Public Face

Convoy security, once the sole realm of military police, has quickly fallen into the hands of infantry units, albeit, active or National Guard. One only needed to look at Al Anbar Province to find such examples. Bravo Company replaced a mechanized infantry company of the 1st Infantry Division. Also, a battalion of the 82nd Airborne Division conducted convoy movements from Jordan. Both are proof, at least for the time being, that this mission isn't strictly for the combat support units or the National Guard.

The pragmatic approach would be to place Saad in every convoy, essentially making him the busiest Soldier in the company. But with different squads leaving

at all times of the day throughout the week, picking the best mission would have been a matter of opinion, not science. Among the questions:

* Should he go on long missions through some of Iraq's named areas of interest or Tier 1 hot spots?

* Would it be better for him to go into locations where there was a likelihood of stops in urban areas or where interaction with Iraqi police and Army was most probable?

* Do we base it on the most recent intelligence?

* What exactly should be the criteria?

We didn't have a good answer. One thing was for sure, though: If we had seven linguists or translators, it would be a no-brainer to attach one to each squad.

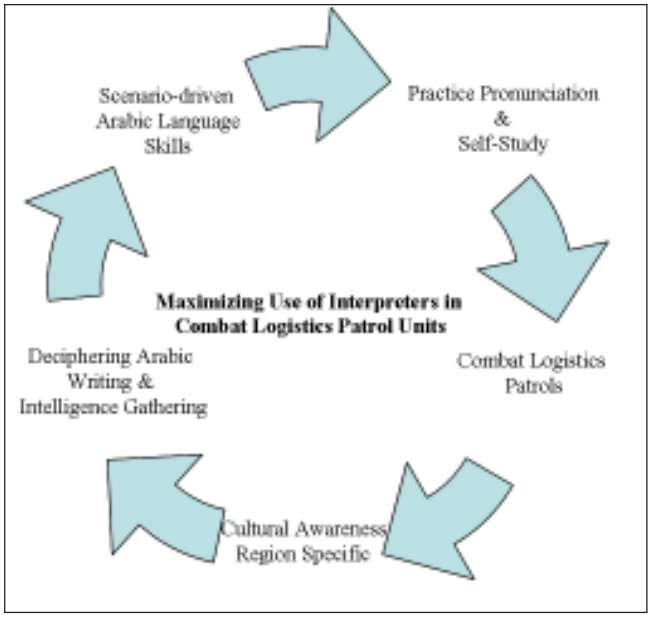

Figure 1

"Interpreters are the public face of the counterinsurgency effort to the local population; on their words hinges success or failure," wrote LTC John Nagl in the foreword to *Instructions for American Servicemen in Iraq during World War II.* "It is far easier to defeat an insurgency with words than with machine guns."

Nagl, then commander of the 1st Battalion, 34th Armor at Fort Riley, Kan., understands firsthand the importance of this commodity. Among the leading visionaries to help "move the Army out of its comfort zone," he authored several books before recently retiring, including *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* and contributed to the Army's recently released Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24.

As a Category II linguist, SGT Saad is a U.S. citizen with a secret clearance. Brigade commands, by doctrine, should have access to 10 to 15 of these linguists.

Here, however, is where the idealism and reality fail to meet. There are 450 heritage speakers in the military today with an additional 150 Soldiers in the pipeline, according to David S.C. Chu, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

The reasons for such a low figure, which amounts to one translator aide for every 1,100 Soldiers in theater, are rather simple. Contrasting that number to the total in the armed forces is even more startling. Why so?

First, the program is still in its infancy, launched in 2003 to recruit individuals from the Arabic, Dari and Pashto communities to serve in the Individual Ready Reserve and be prepared to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Second, the war on terrorism has only taken place within the last seven years.

Third, and more tellingly, the Defense Department, at its own admittance, has had a tough time recruiting and retaining these skilled personnel.

The demand for linguists has exceeded the supply, and the military has been unwilling or unable to compete with other federal agencies or lucrative private contractors.

In 2005, the Army offered a $10,000 bonus for these "heritage speakers" to enlist for eight years. In 2001, the most recent year available, the U.S. Government Accountability Office issued a report that reviewed the shortfalls of foreign languages in four federal agencies, including the Defense Department. The DoD failed meet half of its Arabic translator and interpreter positions available.

Times have changed, though. In Senate testimony in 2007, Gail McGinn, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans and the agency's senior language authority, said the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) provides $67 million this fiscal year for initiatives to strengthen and expand the language program. Separately, the QDR provides $50 million over a five-year period from 2007 to 2011 to further expand the 09L program.

In 2006, the Army judged the program so successful that 09L was turned into a permanent MOS with a career path that extended to sergeant major.

Language Skills = Warfighting Skills

Michael Dominguez, principal deputy under secretary of Defense for personnel and readiness, told a Senate committee in 2007 that being able to speak to the populace was essentially the only means of prevailing in stability, security, transition and reconstruction operations.

"We must be able to communicate effectively with and gain the support of the local population within the regions in which we operate," Dominguez said. "We responded to this shift in the demands of war fighting with a shift in strategy. Language and regional expertise had to be recognized as critical war-fighting."

Yet, until January 2006, the Command and General Staff School, which produces the service's future senior leadership, did not have any language course requirement, according to a story published in *Congressional Quarterly*.

Still, seven years after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, the most technologically advanced Army in the world is still reduced to graphic training aids and sign language. Even the free Rosetta Stone program available to all Soldiers and a generous language bonus have not been enough to entice Soldiers to commit themselves to learning a foreign language.

The Big Five

Unable to figure out the best use of our linguist almost led Saad to learning a skill McGinn and Dominguez probably never had in

mind. But Saad left the headquarters platoon for a line platoon before he could receive a bus license to shuttle Soldiers back and forth.

Saad went out on several CLPs after receiving a license to drive the M1117 Armored Security Vehicle, M1083 Gun Truck and M1151 High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheel Vehicle. Completing the missions gave the squad he was assigned to the comfort of knowing they would have the ability to de-escalate any issue on the road. But it did very little for the other squads.

That's when the idea of duplication became more than a concept. To accomplish more with less, several sergeants and I came up with good practical ways of making Saad more effective. We called it "The Big 5."

1. Scenario-driven Arabic language skills

Driven by the experiences of NCOs who led the majority of convoys, seven situations were gleaned where an interpreter would have been invaluable. Saad developed a series of simple phrases that could help Soldiers communicate with Iraqi civilians and authorities.

Of course, similar products are readily available, but they use the shotgun approach. And saying *"erfah eedeeyek,"* which means hands up, is no way to win friends. Particularly when all you need is an inattentive driver to move his vehicle.

Our vehicle, usually an M1117 Armored Security Vehicle, was not the best means of communicating with people on the road. But many of them were equipped with public address systems which provided the added benefit of being able to communicate with some safety measures built in. See Figure 2 for situations and phrases that were identified.

2.Practice Pronunciation and Self-Study

In a November 2008 statement before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, McGinn stated that all three Service Academies have "enhanced their foreign language study programs to develop or enhance pre-accession language and cultural knowledge. They expanded study abroad, summer immersion and foreign academy exchange opportunities; and added instructor staff for strategic languages."

And while physical training remains an integral part of basic training, language training is not. Considering the bonuses paid to those who enter the Army with that skill, it might be an inexpensive tool to put into practice, an idea that attracted the attention of at least one Congressman.

Last year, Rep. Vic Snyder, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee's panel on Oversight and Investigations, suggested to colleagues that the Marines' boot camp was the appropriate place to begin language training.

"In the Marine Corps, every Marine is a rifleman and a big part of boot camp is learning to shoot," said Snyder, a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War. "That's just

Figure 2

Road Block
1. Hello — *Salam Alaykum*
2. We need to move your car — *Sanuharik Sayaratuk*
3. Go there — *Ezhab hunak*
4. Sit down — *Ejlis*
5. Can you start your car — *Tadoor Sayaratuk*
6. We will call for help — *Sanatasil bilmusa-ada*
7. Move — *Itharak*
8. Hurry Up — *Bisur-ahh*
9. You will not be harmed — *Marah-in a theekum*
10. Goodbye — *Ma as salama*

Iraqi Army/Iraqi Police Checkpoint
1. Move your Vehicle, Please — *Rajaa-an, harik sayaratuk*
2. Turn off your lights — *Etfi aldaww*
3. Wait here until convoy pass — *Intazir huna leekay namur*
4. Don't point guns at us — *Khayir itijah slahak*
5. What is the road's name — *Ma Esm haza altareek*
6. Good morning — *Sabah Alkhayar*
7. Give us some space — *Ebtaed Kaleelan*
8. Goodbye — *Ma as salama*

Following Too Closely
1. Stay far away — *Ebka Baeedan*
2. Don't get too close — *La tataqarab*
3. Turn lights off/down — *Etfee alnour/ watee alnour*
4. Move to the right —*Taharak lil-yameen*
5. Move to the left — *Taharak lil-yassar*
6. Stop your car — *Waqeef sayaratuk*
7. Turn lights on — *Dawee alnour*
8. Speed up — *Taharak beesur-ahh*

Lost Convoy
1. Show us this road — *Dulana ala altareeq*
2. Take us to — *Khuzna ila*
3. What is the name of this place — *Ma esmu haza almakan*
4. We need your help — *Nureed almussahada*
5. Thank you — *Shukran*
6. What town is this — *Shou esm hal balda*

Military Accident
1. We are sorry — *Ahhsifeen*
2. Don't worry — *La taqlaq*
3. You will be paid — *Sayudfa-ou lak*
4. Take this paper to nearest post — *Khuz hazeh alwaraqa leeaqrab*
5. We have a medic — *Maana mudhamid*
6. Be quiet— *Sukoot*
7. Goodbye — *Ma as salama*

IED Explosion
1. Stay away — *Ebta-eedoo*
2. Go home — *Ezhaboo lilbayt*
3. Get on your stomach — *Enbateehoo*
4. Nobody move — *La tataharakoo*
5. We don't want to shoot anyone — *Lan narmee ahad bilrassass*
6. Follow my hand sign — *Etbaou esharat yadi*
7. No one is to use a phone — *La tastamelou alhatif*
8. Who can speak English — *Meen yatakalam alengleezy*
9. Danger — *Khatar*
10. Evacuate the area — *Ekhloo il mantaqa*

General Directives
1. Good Morning — *Sabaah El Khayr*
2. How are you — *Shlonek*
3. Thank you for your help — *Shukran leemusa atek*
4. My name is ___ — *Esmee* ___
5. Stop — *Qif*
6. Hands up — *Erfa ayadeek*
7. We come in peace — *Jeena beesalam*
8. This is an emergency — *Halat tawareh*
9. Water — *Maya*
10. Drink — *Eshrab*

ingrained in you, and you know that's important. Discipline is important, honor is important, shooting a rifle is important. If we think this (foreign language proficiency) is important, then why not have that be from the get-go, from day one?"

The added benefit of slowly filling the funnel of potential linguists within the ranks using a systematic approach might yield only a handful out of thousands. More importantly, it would cost the Army very little.

At Al Asad, good fortune met opportunity, even if it took a little prodding. Saad became an instructor at the inaugural Combat Logistics Patrol Academy run by the 507th Corps Support Group (Airborne), a subordinate unit of 18th Airborne Corps. For a few hours, he taught incoming Soldiers simple phrases. Due to time constraints, a planned lane training scenario, where the Soldiers could practice the language, did not occur. That didn't dampen the possibilities though.

But what would they do with it afterward? Would their leadership require them to keep the provided "cheat sheet" in their vehicles to be used as needed, like the first-aid pouch?

3. Deciphering Arabic Writing and Intelligence Gathering

This was surprisingly the easiest task we could have thought of. Every time a Soldier went out on the road, it was an opportunity to gather intelligence. With the use of a camera, still shots or video gave almost "real time" data. Particularly, when the intelligence was spray painted on a building or on a 32-square-foot piece of plywood in Arabic. Unfortunately, the insurgent doesn't necessarily use red paint to indicate warnings.

How difficult would it be to have the convoy commander turn in digital photos of Arabic writing to the intelligence section each time he reported to the operations center? If a linguist was stationed there, he could quickly scan the writings and inform whether the writings were cautions to locals or third country nationals of improvised explosive devices or pending attack. This technique would have been invaluable and falls quite in line with "every Soldier is a sensor." Most importantly, the multiplier effect of the interpreter's skill was magnified.

Its application would have been quite simple as well. Over SIPR (Secret Internet Protocol Router), the photos could be sent to various commands with grid coordinates. We were not successful in having this done at the company level, but it worked extremely well for my platoon.

4. Region-specific Cultural Awareness

There's probably no harder job in the Army than to fake authenticity or expertise, particularly when no one buys it. That was the impossible task of the trainers who were tasked with explaining culturally significant acts and customs. But the Soldiers were neither Arab, spoke the language, nor served in the AO we were being sent.

With little trouble, Saad came to our unit with a PowerPoint that was specifically tailored for MNF-W. Over the course of the deployment, he proved to be very valuable in chatting with other translators, namely, the civilians and those working with Special Operations Forces. This culture is no different than ours: Familiarity breeds friendships. It also led to a better inkling as to what was the best method of negotiating certain areas.

When Saad gave his presentation to the CLP Academy, it was legitimate. For the first time, some Soldiers and instructors said, someone who "knew what they're talking about" was leading the discussion.

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5. Combat Logistics Patrols

Of all of the means of using the 09L, the actual convoy is the easiest part. In fact, it's simply a matter of picking the routes where he might be of most use. As stated previously, there isn't much science here. It merely depends on how busy the command wants its translator to be. The obvious answer would be to keep him very busy. But this comes with a warning. Unlike civilians who are being paid handsomely, 09L Soldiers are still American Soldiers. We would never consider disproportionately overusing or overworking any one service member, so why here?

When he went out, we used SGT Saad as a driver, but he was also trained to man the .50 cal. In fact, he was an expert marksman on the M4, something few others were. In the scenarios listed earlier, he handled all of them, which is how the list was drafted. But every time he was out with one squad, that meant six other squads had no access.

Conclusion

Here is another point to consider, one that forces the operational leader to think in strategic terms. As noted earlier, the military has had a difficult time recruiting from the ranks of men and women with Arabic and other uncommon backgrounds. The suspicion of the military and other social reasons probably play the biggest hurdles to enticing these "heritage speakers."

So, I wondered how the recruiting effort would be hurt had Saad been killed or injured. While this is an unfortunate part of the profession, I wondered how much this would set back the big picture in his neighborhood — the very one the Army is spending millions to lure.

As of this writing, the operations in Iraq seem to be waning down, which begs the question as to whether this article comes "too little, too late." If history teaches us anything, we cannot learn enough from the experiences of those who went before us.

Having searched long and wide for a "best practices" with the use of translators in combat logistics patrols, it proved difficult to locate. So, hopefully this essay has done its job and left something for others to ponder maybe with other conflicts or languages. Perhaps even moved us beyond stage one.

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SGT J. Saad, a National Guard Soldier, is bilingual in English and Arabic and a certified translator by DoD through the 09L program. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science, master's degree in public administration and Ph.D in American government/public policy.