

Multinational Success Requires Multilingual Troops

By 1st Lt. Nicholas B. Naquin

To maintain our competitive edge, the Army must demand that junior tactical leaders have practical fluency in at least one foreign language and invest accordingly. Foreign language fluency empowers partner nations and increases organizational efficiency. Moreover, it fosters the flexible and adaptable leadership we need to face present and future challenges worldwide.

I became convinced of this stance after my recent experience in Ukraine. Throughout 2014, a smoldering civil conflict there burst into open violence. As the world watched this violence threaten to spin out of control, the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, was ready to act.

In January 2015, my battalion, based in Vicenza, Italy, received a unique mission entirely outside the battalion's traditional operational roles: conduct foreign internal defense missions by training the newly formed National Guard of Ukraine for stability operations throughout a nation plagued by civil strife. After a month of feverish preparations, our paratroopers from Legion Company were ready to deploy to Ukraine for the inaugural iteration of Operation Fearless Guardian.

Newly assigned to Legion Company, I took over my responsibilities as an airborne rifle platoon leader as our unit hit the ground in early April 2015. As a company, we did not know what to expect when we got to Yavoriv Training Area in western Ukraine, but it was immediately clear that the area assigned to us as a training site needed significant improvements before the imminent arrival of two National Guard of Ukraine companies about a week later.

As combined elements from Bulldog Troop, 1st Squadron (Airborne), 91st Cavalry Regiment and Legion Company started building our task force's training areas from scratch, we



determined that without some kind of flooring below the nine tents we had set up for classrooms, our training site would not only be unprofessional in appearance but also fall prey to any inclement weather—and that would quickly compromise our training, movement and support plans. After juggling several ideas, our task force leaders decided that we needed to put down gravel for classroom flooring, parking lots, and access points to our training site.

No Points of Contact

But how does one acquire 1,500 tons of gravel in rural Ukraine with little notice and no points of contact? As our newly arrived task force logistic elements were having trouble securing gravel from our main provider of building supplies, my company and task force leadership asked me, a brand-new platoon leader, to tackle this problem.

Little in my military education had prepared me to find,



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Clockwise from top left: 173rd Airborne Brigade paratroopers arrive in Ukraine for a six-month deployment to train National Guard of Ukraine soldiers; a paratrooper briefs Ukrainian troops; a Ukrainian soldier rushes to position during a timed assessment; Maj. Gen. William Gayler, center, deputy commander of U.S. Army Europe, is briefed during a squad live-fire exercise.

buy, transport and install more than 1,500 tons of gravel within three days at a training camp in an isolated corner of Ukraine. Yet this was what the mission demanded.

I simply approached the first Ukrainian officer I could find and explained to him in Russian the problem at hand. He immediately put me in touch with Ukrainian Lt. Col. Alexander Shelydko, a logistics officer from the Ukrainian Army supporting Fearless Guardian. With a few phone calls, Shelydko found the solution to our task force's problem.

Within a day, I found myself with two of my paratroopers at a remote gravel pit near the Polish-Ukrainian border overseeing the loading and delivery of gravel in trucks that Shelydko resourced. Over the telephone, I coordinated the distribution of the gravel at Yavoriv with U.S. Army 1st Lt. Rudolph Weisz. As I watched trucks come and go from the gravel pit, Weisz was at our training site, sitting beside the driver of a large tractor that Shelydko also resourced for us. Weisz, also

fluent in Russian, directed the tractor driver to clear terrain and distribute gravel where needed as our paratroopers spread the gravel with shovels, mounted tents and prepared the professional-looking and practical site that served us as well as later Fearless Guardian iterations.

Thanks to hard work by our partners and paratroopers, we achieved our commander's intent much quicker and at far less cost than we could have done using the only other known sources available to us in Ukraine at the time.

Magic Ingredient

The magic ingredient to solving this problem, as in so many of Legion Company's undertakings during the inaugural iteration of Fearless Guardian, was adequate language knowledge. During our preparations for this operation, our battalion commander, Lt. Col. Patrick Wilkins, understood the importance of having tactical leaders with appropriate language skills. For

this reason, he hand-picked Weisz and me to go to Ukraine with Legion Company in February 2015.

Weisz's parents were longtime U.S. Department of State diplomats who had served in Russia, where he had spent most of his youth. For my part, I had studied Russian for three years as an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University, lived in St. Petersburg for a year as an English teacher from 2003 to 2004, and had gained fluency in military Russian and slang during my service for the French Foreign Legion from 2008 to 2010, where native Russian speakers were as plentiful as native French speakers.

During our time in Ukraine, in addition to translators picked from throughout the 173rd Airborne Brigade who contributed enormously to the operation's success, Weisz and I, two commissioned officers, were able to communicate directly with all echelons of our Ukrainian partner units. I could describe countless episodes like the one above, in which the language knowledge organic to our company leadership empowered our partners, vastly increased our organization efficiency, and fostered the flexible and adaptable leadership that is and will remain essential to operating effectively as a global force.

Partner Nations Empowered

Having senior leaders with appropriate language knowledge empowers partner nations to contribute more effectively to joint operations. Every infantryman knows that his primary tasks are to shoot, move and communicate. For infantry leaders, communication is clearly the most important of these three tasks, as they coordinate the application of lawful violence as well as the training needed to harness this violence. In partnership training operations, especially, effective communication with all echelons of our partner nations takes precedence over other infantry tasks.

Leaders throughout the U.S. military engage with partner forces to ensure the success of operations worldwide. If we must rely on translators to filter information between us and partner forces, we invariably strain the communications architecture binding us with our partners. True, we may have liaison officers and translators there to help, but their time and energies are limited. What is more, we are often unable to understand the internal politics of partner forces, and we therefore cannot see whose voices may or may not be marginalized or amplified in

translation. With a direct line of communication from our own tactical leaders to partner forces, we empower their leaders to identify solutions to problems and contribute to the mission.

The example of the gravel delivery is telling. We never would have found this effective solution to a substantial logistical challenge had I not been able to speak Russian and approach a partner leader with this problem. Shelydko spoke no English whatsoever. Without our language knowledge, given the halting flow of information through translators and staff—especially at that early point in the operation—his solution, to which we returned several times over the course of Fearless Guardian, probably would never have come to our attention, and surely not in a day.

Lost in Translation

Direct communication with the partner force also drastically increases organizational efficiency. In the safety and known contexts of our own garrisons, leaders would find it absolutely unacceptable to play a game of telephone, all in English, in which another soldier would transmit messages, orders and social interactions to subordinates, peers and superiors. In such a hypothetical game of telephone comprising speakers of the same language, members of the same culture and soldiers in the same organization, countless messages, implied and stated, would be lost in translation as soldiers tried to relay information back and forth among leaders and subordinates.

And how many of the nonverbal communications on which soldiers rely would mean little or nothing as they passed through the mouths of our telephone operators? How much time would leaders lose trying to make sure that their communications were clearly understood? Would they even have the time to ensure that they were clearly transmitted?



Vasyl Mykhailovych Gevalo, director of a wood-working vocational school in Ukraine, presents the author, 1st Lt. Nicholas B. Naquin, with a plate produced by a student in a community outreach program.

U.S. Army/Sgt. Alex Skripnichuk



Aerial view of the Presidio of Monterey, Calif., home to the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center

We would never accept such an unwieldy communications architecture in the safety of our own garrisons. How much less, then, should we accept an even less reliable and more cumbersome architecture in unfamiliar operational environments in which our partners belong to different cultures and speak organizational and national languages markedly different from our own?

Having leaders with adequate language knowledge cuts the time needed for communication in half, at least, by removing translators from the equation. In most cases, it also increases the accuracy and reliability of our communication. Although it may not be possible to have leaders throughout the organization with knowledge of a particular language, it would be very helpful to have appropriately trained leaders at “friction points” throughout our task forces for partnership operations.

Comfortable With Being Uncomfortable

Finally, the very process of language learning fosters the flexible, adaptable leadership needed in the global force of today and the future. More so than anything I learned in the Foreign Legion, during my officer education, in Ranger School or since my arrival at the 173rd, working through the infantilization and misunderstandings that we invariably undergo as we advance from beginner to fluency in a foreign language prepared me to deal with the unexpected and to grow comfortable with being uncomfortable. I learned four different European languages as an adult and over a period of 10 years, most of which I spent abroad. Negotiating through the challenges of daily life as a student of foreign cultures fostered flexibility and adaptability, which has served me well so far in my military career.

A quote often attributed to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V reads: “A man who speaks four languages is worth four men.” What this quote intends to convey is not only the technical value of speaking four languages, but also the accu-

mulated wisdom and know-how that it takes to learn four languages, communicate in them, and function with ease in foreign cultures.

In light of our worldwide commitments, we cannot fail to make language education for Army leaders a priority. In order to increase language proficiency throughout the force, every battalion should choose 10 volunteers—five officers and five NCOs—and provide them with two months of intensive language instruction at their post, given by qualified personnel from the Defense Language Institute. Following this crash course, the volunteers would be required to undertake an internship or course of study (including military schooling) from six to 10 months at a military or civilian institution in one of the battalion’s regionally aligned nations.

The battalion adjutant should make appropriate arrangements to accommodate this training in these soldiers’ timelines, such as shifting officers’ year group, and all battalion leadership should support this as an effort essential to force generation. Within a few years, leaders throughout the Army would recognize the high value of training junior leaders early in languages, and in requiring proficiency for advancement and promotion.

After Legion Company’s experiences in Ukraine, the question is not whether we can afford to invest in language proficiency for junior leaders but instead, how can we afford not to make this investment, given the Army’s worldwide commitments? ★

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