

A Foreign Military Training Odyssey^[1]

By

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I was recently on temporary duty (TDY) to three countries in an out-of-the-way African region. During my many years in security assistance, I have travelled extensively throughout the world. However, I had never travelled to Africa south of the Sahara. I had also heard the many stories about this part of Africa and how the long journey of bringing African foreign military trainees (FMTs) from there to the United States for training was, in and of itself, a miracle. One story, in fact, went: "If it works, it cannot be Africa." I was determined, however, to find out for myself. The results were extremely rewarding and I now wish to return to Africa for an indepth follow-on experience.

In order to experience all aspects of the trip, to include those experienced by African FMTs, I decided to put myself in the position of the African trainee leaving his country for the first time and coming to the United States. In addition, I also wanted to experience the Department of Defense (DOD) Informational Program (IP) from the perspective of the African trainee.^[2] However, in order to do so properly, I decided to reverse engineer the DOD IP into an African country's IP. As I suspected, my expectations were realized in both instances.

By way of preparation for the trip, I had provided myself with what I considered to be an adequate predeparture briefing. This included the following actions. I had made and confirmed my travel arrangements. The required arrival message had been prepared days earlier and dispatched (or so I thought). I had a valid passport in hand with the appropriate visas--the visas required according to U.S. authorities. Finally, I had made myself well-read on the area and the countries I was to visit.

Therefore, with all in order, I proceeded to the airport on the appropriate date and boarded a commercial jet. The plane, a jumbo jet, was larger than most African houses; it carried more people than lived in many African villages; and the majority of the passengers were of different races and some of which I had never seen before. In addition, a perfume scent permeated the aircraft's immaculate interior, not to mention the babel of strange languages spoken by the passengers and which came over loudspeakers. This initial shock had not quite passed when a "pretty lady" anxiously strapped me into my seat as she also tried hurriedly to explain the use of a mask which was somehow to pop out from above me and which I was to use in case of an emergency. At the same time, she told me that there was also a vest beneath my seat in case of another emergency, but this time over water. Then suddenly and before any of the information could sink in, I found my head forced against the back of my seat as the plane surged into the heavens. As I sat in mortal fear and perspiration, my thoughts were how did I get myself into this predicament; and, if this was only the beginning of my trip, what new surprises were in store for me. Needless to say, it was hours before I dared to venture from my seat, and then only of necessity in order to find the W.C. which I eventually found market "toilet."

Thirty-six hours later after much consternation and apprehension, I finally landed at my training destination. In the meantime, I had also experienced new challenges. This included changing aircraft twice, including airlines. In one case, at the Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris, I had to transit terminals by way of skyward-rising, zigzagging steps which moved in a plastic tube with people scurrying past me. Finally, after what seemed miles later, I found my next terminal, airline, and gate number whereupon I set in for a long six-hour layover before my next flight.

Having miraculously found this location, I dared not leave the area for fear of not finding the place again. This time, as I prepared myself for the next part of my journey, I felt more secure. For one thing, I had become somewhat accustomed to my surroundings. Nevertheless, I remained scared because each segment of my trip revealed new mysteries and there was still the unknown of what I would find at my final destination if I was lucky enough to arrive there.

Upon arrival at my first destination, I was met by the Security Assistance Officer (SAO). I was especially elated to see this friendly face, especially since I knew the individual from a previous assignment and did not know that he had been assigned to this diplomatic post. My glee was short lived, however, when he advised me that I had been denied clearance for my next destination--for reasons that are best left unsaid here. For the purpose of this article, suffice it to note that the denial of entry to my second destination was to prove a blessing in disguise. First, it gave me full appreciation of the problems encountered by our FMTs when they are faced with delays in "transit," which require new flight and billeting arrangements, corrected arrival messages, and all the other problems caused by an unexpected change in travel. In my case, however, I had the experience of being a seasoned traveller. Besides, I had in my possession more money than possessed by most African FMTs--not to mention a credit card--to carry me over until my arrival at my first pay and duty training installation. Second, the denial was also to provide me with more time at my first destination since I could not reshuffle my meeting schedule at my third destination. Besides, I dared not change my airline reservations, believing that one CONUS reservation [in the hand] was worth two in the bush, especially in Africa.

The denial of entry to my second destination was not the only bad news which the SAO had for me. The news included the following: I would have to fend pretty much for myself after our initial working discussions because the SAO would be snowed under with a visiting dignitary who had a retinue of 19 persons; I should return to my hotel before dark because of an in-country anti-American terrorist threat;^[3] and that my arrival notice had arrived in country just one hour before my actual arrival. The late arrival message had required some fast footwork on the part of the SAO to meet me, but at least I was spared the dire consequences of the lack of an arrival notice which is well known to all SAOs, FMTs, and FTOs. Nevertheless, I was soon to be faced with a problem also encountered from time to time by many FMTs, i.e., lack of a proper visa.

Before departing CONUS, I was told by U.S. passport personnel that I did not need a visa to enter the country if I had an official passport, military orders, and a military identification card. Apparently, someone had forgotten to provide this information to the local country authorities who insisted upon a visa to enter country. After my attempts to convince the official went for naught, my SAO escort officer joined me in an attempt to explain my case to the passport/visa control official. That the SAO was with the U.S. Embassy seemed to carry little weight with the official who continued to insist that I needed a visa to enter his country. All the while, behind me, was a long growing queue of impatient travellers.

Noticing the hold up, an "inspector" came to inquire into the problem; and since he was more fluent in English than the previous official, our discussion proceeded beyond the mere "Visa yes, no visa no" syndrome. As a result, I was granted admittance on the basis of the documentation noted earlier. In reality, however, I do not believe that the force of our explanation won the day. More than likely, fancying himself as a diplomat, he merely apologized for the delay. From thereon, clearing immigration, customs, and baggage was a snap and before long I was on my way to my hotel.

It occurred to me later what would have happened if I had been an FMT in a similar predicament. As an American and seasoned traveller, hindsight told me to tell the visa control officer that while I would accept his decision, I still needed to talk to the officer in charge in order to clarify the visa position taken by my own authorities. This, I felt, would have permitted me to make my case at a level above that of the visa control officer without hurting his feelings or

challenging his authority. It is doubtful that such a ploy would have worked for an FMT in transit to training in the U.S. In any case, it does emphasize the necessity of having U.S. military representatives meet FMTs arriving at U.S. ports of entry (especially those from the non-English speaking developing countries) in order to assist them in clearing passport-visa control, customs, etc., and to direct them to their follow-on destinations.

In summary, at the risk of possible redundancy, it might be well to note the following points.

One cannot really appreciate the size and the impact upon our African FMTs of today's commercial jet airliners, and especially the jumbo jets. For most of them, automobile or animal cart travel is the general rule. As Americans, we also take for granted transiting cosmopolitan centers such as Geneva, Paris, Frankfurt, London, and New York, etc. In contrast, many African FMTs have not even spent any time in their own capital city, let alone another country. Moreover, consider that their first introduction to travel is in planes which are often larger than many of their homes; the "smiling" faces of serving female flight attendants where a similar smile may have different connotations; a first encounter with totally different cuisine and eating habits; the new "aroma" which surrounds them from the moment they board the plane and leave country (and throughout their stay in the U.S.); the experience of meeting or sitting next to total strangers from 24 to 36 hours and, oftentimes, overnighing in a foreign country with strange languages and customs. For these reasons alone, the mere task of first bringing together in the U.S. and then returning home so many FMTs of diverse races, cultures, nationalities, religions, political persuasions, and economic strata and development is alone a significant accomplishment. For that matter, the overall program has proceeded unabated for more than three decades with so few problems that it might be called the quiet miracle program.

After completing my formal discussions with the SAO, I hastened to execute an Informational Program which I had developed for myself. Unfortunately, however, I also decided not to take a camera along since, reportedly, all Americans carry cameras and, therefore, a camera could give me away as an American to terrorists.[4]

The IP which I fashioned was based on the DOD IP objectives and guidelines. Furthermore, the program was conditioned by my brief stay in country, the impromptu nature of the places to be visited, and the fact that it was the rainy season of the year. Nevertheless, I hope the FTOs will agree that I was able to achieve a fairly balanced understanding of this country's society, institutions, ideals, and human rights practices. They might also note that, since time was exceedingly limited, the program was devoid of the entertainment/fun things to do. At the same time, I would note that there is always the temptation to unbalance the program with the nice things to do which are divorced of political content or require additional effort on the part of all concerned.

As I ventured into my IP, I quickly noticed two things: first, cars drove on the *right* side of the street (Americans drive on the *wrong* side) and the pedestrian flow on the sidewalks also went in the same direction. It took only a few friendly nudgings to join the walking masses or looking the right way for traffic at street crossings. The next thing I was surprised to find was that I was not accosted by any "hawkers"; in fact, I was even asked for street directions by some of the natives. The situation became clear to me when U.S. Embassy personnel explained that I could pass for one of the large native minority groups who resided there. Descendants of the Spartan King Menelaus, my parents came through Ellis Island which had a way of changing immigrants' names, making them almost unrecognizable. However, what I didn't know was that Alexander and his Macedonian Greeks who went beyond the Indus were also Spartans. In any case, I put Alexander's past service to good use during the IP. When I needed street directions, I would put my questions to the Indian populace which, in the beginning, at least, thought that they were talking to one of their own, especially after I had purposely developed a two-day beard growth.

Before reporting on the IP topics specifically,[5] I should also note that *after* the first day, I also purchased locally a pair of "desert" boots, thereby heeding the earlier advice of the SAO. As he advised, brogue style shoes on this country's irregular paved streets proved hard on one's feet.

Not unlike most developing countries, I found that the old was giving way to the new. Consequently, mixed with buildings from colonial times, there were high rises, modern bank buildings, and some modern shops. However, there were not any real department stores or supermarkets much in evidence. Similarly, while there were many "native" hamburger and pizza shops, there weren't any (at least I did not see them) MacDonal'd's, Gino's, Shakey's, etc. There was, however, a Kentucky Fried Chicken emporium. And, last but not least, there were also the ubiquitous Hilton and Inter-Continental hotels. I stayed at neither--preferring the "Bwana" and "Mum" environment of an English type hotel for comparable monies.

As I continued my tour, I could not but also notice all the other characteristics of modern *civilization* which had crept alongside the old. This included the ever present Japanese salesmen and their wares. Interestingly enough, I encountered one of the gentlemen in the elevator of my hotel one day with an armful of some 20 neatly wrapped and ribboned packages which all looked like watch boxes. When I noted to him that he appeared to have many presents, he replied "Yes, these people like presents."

At the same time, there were street people who ply their trade from the sidewalks. These were shoemakers and shoe repairers who with an awl, needle, thread, leather, and hammer, and hunched over a bench, carried on the cobbler's profession in the traditional way, while there was a well known international and modern shoe factory in town. Similarly, there was the city open air market with its fishmongers, butchers, and vegetable sellers; and, at the same time, there were native women selling lemons, limes, potatoes, and onions on the sidewalks alongside a chain store "supermarket," and also convenience stores which, by our standards, left much to be desired. However, candy and cigarettes could still be had in single quantities from street vendors since this was what the general populace could afford.

In the transport area, there was a multitude of small, individually-owned private buses, often no larger than a small-medium size van, which carried 15-20 passengers. The local newspapers called them sardine carriers. The vans competed successfully with regular-sized municipal buses which were only seldom crowded because of "market factors," i.e., higher fares and less frequent schedules. Surprisingly, in spite of dense traffic and no traffic policemen, traffic flowed smoothly, even during heavy rainstorms. In contrast, similar downpours paralyze traffic in Washington, DC. Then there was the ultimate evil of civilization--the parking meters and meter maids that permeated the "downtown" area. Except in this case, the meters and meter maids have come before overall economic development and, consequently, this country is one up on us on this score.

Finally, while I was in country, it was announced that government employees would generally go on a five-day work week in order to accord with much of the private sector and to permit many civil servants to visit their kinfolk "up country" on weekends. U.S. civil servants may wish to take notice. Apparently, "someone" still cares about government workers.

As I trekked further about town, I came upon an interesting and unique communications system. There, in the center of a plaza, in what during the nineteenth century was the crossroads of town and the jump-off point into "darkest Africa," was a very large and old thorn tree. I was told that, during colonial times travellers would randomly post messages on the tree announcing to their friends the time and date of their departure from that point, their onward destination(s), their estimated time(s) of arrival, their proposed date(s) of return, etc. The tree serves the same purpose today except that the messages are now scrawled on 3X5 inch cards put inside glass enclosures that are now affixed to the old tree.

From what I could tell, and I surely do not purport to be an expert after one visit, newspapers, magazines, etc., appear abundant and, to a degree, critical of government and municipality operations. There was also a state-run television station whose programming will be, I hope, improved with time. At the same time, there was another television station that transmitted only written news which was worldwide in scope and, seemingly at least, neutral in political and economic content. Finally, there were four or five cinemas, mostly showing American movies which I was told were featured at the earliest between one and two years after their first showing in the United States.

With respect to religion, I personally located the following houses of worship: Jewish (Orthodox); Roman Catholic; Anglican; Greek Orthodox; Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist; and a mosque adjacent to the open air marketplace. I was also told that there were the following other religious institutions in town: Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Methodist, and Mormon. In this respect, the city was not unlike the United States. Moreover, since this was Easter Week, and since I could not attend midnight services because of a general terrorist threat advisory, I made it a point, however, to attend midday Good Friday services at the Greek Orthodox Church, where I met a priest who was born in Wyoming and had last served the Greek Orthodox Church in Houston, Texas. I must note that while this person may be serving his church, he and his American wife (in the Eastern Orthodox church parish priests may marry) are also serving America because there is no mistaking that they *are* Americans. The second priest at the church was a black native, and the communicants were from the U.S., Greece, other Balkan countries, Lebanon, Russia, and, of course, the local black population.

With respect to education, I visited the nation's national university and also the university's law school which was on a separate campus. One of my two professional desires early in life was to be a teacher, and since I had, in a sense, come home to the profession in the foreign military training program, I took special care to include a university in my IP tour. This included a visit to the university library, for I have always held that the heart of any fine educational institution is its library. This university had a student body of 6,000 undergraduates, 1,500 graduate students, and a library with holdings of 300,000 books, documents, and periodicals.

The students were especially interested in the United States, and, as one would expect, the librarians were singularly interested in the American libraries and in the application of the computer--which they do not have--to library sciences. When I explained that the present Dewey card catalogue system would soon be passe in America--even in municipal libraries--they were not only surprised but I also found myself explaining to them the U.S. public library system. For one, they seemed surprised to learn that even the smallest municipality in America was sure to possess a public library.

As elsewhere, I feel the future of any country lies in the products of its educational system. In my discussions with students, university personnel, and in research in the library, I noted that much had been done here to expand education and university attendance in the 25 years since the country's independence. By chance during the course of these discussions, an apology was volunteered by one of the discussants that they could not compare in many ways to America and American universities. In reply, I volunteered that it took the United States 200 years to progress to where we were; as an independent nation, their country was only 25 years old, and therefore no apologies were needed. Moreover I pointed out that, like their country, America was also once a colony but that we had the good fortune of achieving our independence long ago; that we were only able to cement that independence after two wars (some would say three, if one includes the Civil War or, depending on one's political persuasion, the War Between the States); and that our progress was the result of subsequent vigilance, dedication, political stability, and the hard work of our people. I believe I was able to put the message across.

As I left the university, I could not help but see the obvious, i.e., universities are the same the world over when stripped of political dictates and permitted to teach freely, which appeared to be the case here (at least from my discussions and review of the library card catalogue and the magazine and newspaper racks), supported adequately, and made available to all strata of the population on the basis of equal opportunity. Moreover, if the products of the university are channeled in a positive vein, its influence will be constructive; on the other hand, if the products are directed in a negative way, it is a sure way to national suicide. It is my belief that if this country and its students stay on their present course, progress is assured and the nation's future will be bright.

Included in my IP was a visit to both the country's National Archives and its National Museum. The "Archives" were housed in a beautiful old Greek classical style building. It had Doric columns on the inside rising approximately 40 feet high. The building formerly housed the country's national bank which was now located across the street and, as you would expect, in a modern building. Although very much smaller in size, the National Archives building was not unlike our own National Archives building; however, it contained little in the way of written documents and was devoted principally to pictorial representations and artifacts of the country's multi-tribal ancestry, leadership, and struggle for independence. Nonetheless, after leaving the displays, one cannot help but have the same inspiration as after leaving our own National Archives.

At the National Museum, per choice and chance, I had the good fortune of having as a guide a young "Museum Guide trainee." The person was also a student at one of the local colleges. What impressed me especially about the individual as we toured the museum was his reserve and commitment to his country and to his country's heritage. These traits became readily apparent when at the outset of our meeting I asked him what, in his opinion, he felt were the three most important exhibits; and, as his eyes lit up, he replied: "pre-historic, ethnography, and the struggle for independence." In those three topics, he said most everything a good informational program might be as we proceeded enthusiastically to make the grand tour of the museum's two floors that housed exhibits in 16 major categories. Some of the "Trivia Pursuit" which I garnered follows. At the ethnography exhibit I learned that the nation was made up of 41 ethnic groups which during colonial times were referred to as tribes; there were three language groupings; and the Lingua Franca, other than English, was 80% African in dialect and 20% Arabic. Similarly, I learned that there were approximately 1,500 different birds in this part of Africa, of which some 900 were in this country. Beautifully displayed in the bird exhibit were the 900 such birds stuffed and mounted.

Finally, my last visit before departing the country was the National Memorial and Tomb of the Father of Independence of the Country. As expected, the place was subdued. However, the place was walled off except for a closed iron gate entryway with a guard. No one could enter the grounds with its flag-lined walkway to the tomb itself--whether native or foreigner. It was a pity that you could only observe the tomb from a distance of about 15 yards through a gate, and pictures were strictly prohibited.

In closing out the IP portion of my odyssey, I might also note two additional poignant interest items which I encountered during my self-initiated IP. The first one was a sign in a shop that read, "Dummies for Sale." Needless to say, I did not pursue the matter further. The second interest item had to do with a small sign in the National Archives building which read, "Don't Argue with a Fool" and needs no explanation.

Finally, for those who know me well, I will close out my adventure by answering their question before they ask. Yes, I did find two *authentic* oriental rug shops in town. Consultations, addresses, and introductions, however, will be provided in accordance with standard business practice. And for those who may look askance upon the practice of paying the commission, they

may wish to consider the following in accordance with the objective of the IP, i.e., to acquire a balanced understanding of U.S. society, institutions, and goals. For a long time, we Americans frowned upon the practice of "five percenters," "influence peddlers," etc. However, in a way, have we not now also adopted the practice but see fit to call the practitioners "consultants," "lobbyists," etc.? *Bon voyage.*

NOTES

1. In writing this article, the author has taken some literary license in order to protect the innocent and his sources. He also wishes to thank Dorothy Westley of DSAA for her patience and perseverance in deciphering the author's handwriting in order to type the article. Otherwise, the article would never have seen print. Finally, the author wishes to dedicate the article to all overseas military Security Assistance Officers (SAO), U.S. Embassy personnel, U.S. Army Allied Training Officers (ATO), U.S. Navy Foreign Training Officers (FTO), and the USAF International Training Management Officers (ITMO) who send or receive FMTs from Africa. The ATO, FTO, and ITMO have a very special challenge. These personnel administer the training programs at the service schools and installation levels, provide FMTs logistics support, act as intermediaries between FMTs and school cadres, and conduct the DOD IP. In this capacity, they serve as the day-to-day, 24-hours-a-day "ambassadors" of our security assistance training programs and are the ultimate linch pins in insuring optimum results for the dollars spent on foreign military training.
2. Per Department of Defense Directive (DODD) 5410.17, it is DOD policy to give foreign military trainees and military-sponsored visitors in the United States under the Security Assistance Program every opportunity within the limits of time and available resources to obtain a balanced understanding of U.S. society, institutions, and ideals, and to increase trainee awareness concerning internationally recognized human rights. At the same time, the program is calculated to help trainees to transition into their new environment and, therefore, assist them in their new learning environment as well.
3. In a way, the caution was somewhat similar to that given FMTs to shun high crime areas in the U.S.
4. Failure to carry a camera explains why there are no photographs to accompany this article. In contrast, one of the first things that many FMTs do after they arrive in the U.S. is to buy cameras which are indispensable to any IP tour.
5. Per DODD 5410.17, the 12 areas are: government installations, judicial system, political parties, press, diversity of life, women and minorities, agriculture, economy, labor and management, education, public and social welfare, and human rights.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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