

The U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer Program

By

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The purpose of this article is to describe the Army Foreign Area Officer (FAO) Program. The information is primarily directed toward the person unfamiliar with what a FAO does and how he is trained. Using the experience of the author together with information in Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, this article will provide the reader a basic understanding of what the program is, how it works, and how it is related to the mission of the overseas Security Assistance Organization (SAO).

THE FAO FUNCTIONAL AREA

The FAO functional area is unique to the U.S. Army. It encompasses assignments where expert Army officers apply their regional expertise, language skills, knowledge of U.S. and foreign political-military relationships, and their professional military skills and knowledge in key Army and DOD positions. These skills are best applied to political-military analysis and the development and execution of political-military plans and policy.

The FAO can serve as an attache, key security assistance officer, political-military staff officer, or political-military instructor. He can best be described as the Army's "soldier-statesman." Foreign Area Officers serve in the following organizations:

- The Defense Attache System
- Key positions in Security Assistance Organizations
- The Office of the Secretary of Defense
- The Department of State
- The Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
- The Defense Intelligence Agency
- Combined and Joint Commands
- The Department of the Army Staff
- Army major commands and service schools

Regional areas included in the FAO Program are Latin America, West Europe, South Asia, Russia/East Europe, China, Mid East/North Africa, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa areas as specific regions of concentration.

THE ROLE OF THE FAO

The underlying dimension of the FAO functional area is the combination of regional expertise and political-military awareness with a solid foundation in professional military skills. The key FAO function is to provide a sophisticated linkage between foreign and U.S. political-military institutions. FAO knowledge and skills amplify and build upon the foundation of professional military knowledge, skills, and values that an Army officer gains in a primary branch. These include combat arms, combat support, and combat service support branches that develop the professional knowledge and skills of the junior officer. Even after FAO selection, training, and utilization, the skills gained in the basic branch need to be maintained. This is planned for in the utilization process of FAOs throughout their careers.

WHO IS THE FAO.

Foreign Area Officer is a functional area for commissioned Army officers who are branch qualified as captains. The qualifications for entrance are:

1. The officer is a volunteer.
2. The officer is branch qualified, and
3. The officer will have sufficient time to complete FAO training prior to promotion to major. (Normally, the officer will be designated as a FAO in the fifth or sixth year of commissioned service.)
4. The officer must demonstrate an aptitude for language training by minimum scores on the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) or by measurable proficiency in a foreign language (such as a degree).
5. The officer must hold a baccalaureate degree from an accredited institution. Preferred degrees are in area studies and social/political sciences, but this is flexible.
6. The officer's academic record and Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores must be suitable for admission to quality graduate schools. The officer must provide undergraduate transcripts and current GRE scores *prior to* selection for training.
7. The officer must be eligible for duty in sensitive positions requiring a high standard of personal security.
8. The officer *and* family members must be free of serious or chronic medical problems which would preclude worldwide assignment.

HOW THE FAO IS TRAINED

The Foreign Area Officer training program has undergone substantial change over the years. This process of change has led to a more dynamic education which provides the system with better trained FAOs.

The newly selected FAO first attends a FAO Entry Course, located at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, California. The objectives of this one-week core course are first, to familiarize the FAO trainee with the roles and duties of a FAO, and second, to explain the objectives of each follow-on stage of development in the FAO training and development process. After this one-week FAO Entry Course, the FAO will be given the opportunity to talk with guest speakers concerning the various jobs a FAO might fill. These guest speakers will continue throughout language training at DLI.

Basic language training varies in length from six to twelve months, depending on the level of difficulty of the language studied. The FAO is expected to achieve a minimum language proficiency during entry-level training in order to continue in the program. From language training, the FAO enters a graduate academic program.

For most FAOs, the graduate program is a fully funded program leading to a masters degree in area studies. Universities used are those on the Title VI List of Area Studies Programs maintained by the Department of Education. Officers must seek and gain acceptance to a graduate school on their own merits. As most area studies programs require language expertise, these programs enable the FAOs to maintain or improve their hard won DLI skills. On an exceptional basis only, some officers will enter the FAO Program having already earned a graduate degree in a FAO related discipline and thus will have met the graduate level objective. These exceptions are approved on a case-by-case basis and involve graduate degrees in a wide range of disciplines, from anthropology to geopolitics to political science to sociology. The capstone of the FAO developmental process is the follow-on in-country studies phase of training.

In-country studies are designed to immerse the FAO in a foreign cultural and linguistic environment; to provide advanced language studies; and to develop an in-depth knowledge of the region through a program of travel, research, and study. In most cases, the in-country phase includes FAO attendance at a foreign military or civilian course of instruction. The duration of in-country studies varies from twelve to eighteen months. It is during this phase that the FAO can make the valuable personal contacts that can be most useful to a security assistance organization at some later time.

UTILIZING THE FAO

Foreign Area Officers may serve in the positions discussed earlier, but due to the small number of available FAOs and the unique aspects of the job, FAOs assigned to Security Assistance Organizations are best utilized in the key SAO positions (i.e., Chief or Section Head). The training a FAO receives can be invaluable. While not a translator (an entirely different skill and training process), a FAO's language ability can assist the SAO in understanding key foreign documents and in participating in briefings and discussions with host country personnel. Combined with a regional education and familiarity with the area, in addition to previously developed skills in a primary field (Field Artillery, Infantry, Logistics, etc.), the FAO will be more prepared to interact with counterparts in the host nation's military or government structure. Indeed, the host nation counterpart may even be a contact made earlier during the FAO's training phase.

From a human communications aspect, the FAO's expertise in a foreign area will, at the very least, allow the FAO to better integrate into the local community. The many pitfalls of intercultural exchange are readily avoided by the FAO and family as a result of the study of such problems during the FAO training program. As a result, the FAO will be able to more rapidly and effectively learn the new duties of SAO operations.

Finally, the FAO has received training already. It will rarely be necessary to retrain the FAO to perform in his region, and, most FAOs will experience the majority of their duty in their area of expertise. Thus, the SAO saves time, effort, and money in having personnel assigned in-country who are already familiar with that country.

CONCLUSION

Much of what a Foreign Area Officer does and is trained to do is not quantifiable. In many instances, the FAO's skills only become apparent in a crisis. In the Security Assistance Organization, a high level of regional and specific country expertise is necessary for the chief, for the section heads, and for other specifically designated personnel. A keen appreciation of sensitive political and military issues within the host nation and as regards that nation's relationship with the United States is also required.

These necessary skills go beyond the bounds of the functional areas such as being a pilot, an infantryman, or logistician. With a limited amount of language refresher training and, of course, attendance at the Overseas Course provided by the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM), the FAO will be able to perform in key SAO positions far more readily than those without FAO training. In sum, the FAO's skills are a tightly meshed combination of academic, linguistic, and military attributes that can prove invaluable in furthering the mission and objectives of the Security Assistance Program.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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