
Selection for the Defense Attaché System

By

Colonel Douglas S. Thornblom, USA
and
Major James J. Grzella, USA

The main purpose of this article is to explain the attaché selection process while at the same time dispel misconceptions regarding what it means to become an attaché. A detailed description of the duties of an attaché can be found in a variety of sources printed by each service, and you need only ask your servicing personnel office for the appropriate references. In general, these duties include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Military Attachés are first and foremost *overt* information collectors of military and political military information.
- They are the principal advisors to the U.S. Ambassador on matters concerning the host country's armed forces.
- They function as the personal representatives of their respective Service's Secretary and Chief-of-Staff, to the host country's military.
- In countries where there is no MAAG, MILGP, ODC, etc. present, they also perform security assistance functions.

The Defense Attaché Program is a strictly voluntary program, run by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Deputy Director for Attachés and Operations (DA), and jointly managed by the Military Services. Before proceeding further, it is important to point out that you and your family must *want* to serve in attaché duty; DIA and the Service Managers understand that in these critical assignments, volunteers produce better and more reliable results.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Unlike most other assignments, the attaché selection process must commence at an early date, sometimes up to three years prior to actual "on station" arrival time. The reasons for this long lead time will be more clearly understood after reading this article, but it should be understood from the outset that a great deal of advanced personal and career planning has to be accomplished by any officer contemplating attaché duty. The three-year lead time should be considered a maximum. Some assignments are filled virtually at the last minute, within months of the required "on station" date, due to unexpected events such as death, disqualification, or voluntary withdrawal from the program by nominees. Priority assignments such as command selection may also generate a last minute requirement for a replacement. Another factor affecting lead time in the selection process is the existing qualifications of each applicant. Some officers selected may require less training time, especially if they are already proficient in the language required, or if they have served previous tours as attachés. There is, therefore, no set lead time requirement in applying for an attaché assignment; if you are interested, contact your assignments officer or detailee immediately and express your interest and your preferred geographic area. He or she will be able to provide you with current known assignments, and possible vacancies that you could be programmed to fill.

What are the criteria for being selected as an attaché? Generally, the Military Services and DIA divide requirements into two categories: "mandatory" and "highly desired." These requirements are outlined below, and may be judged separately or in different combinations when assessing a candidate's qualifications for attaché duty.

MANDATORY REQUIREMENTS

Language Proficiency: Since attachés serve in all parts of the world, language training is vitally important. Of course, already having a capability in the country's language for which you are applying is a plus, but the lack of language proficiency, should not, in itself, be a factor in dissuading your application. The Defense Department uses a very effective language "IQ" test to judge an individual's ability for learning a language--the Defense Language Aptitude Battery or DLAB. Defense Department statistics consistently show that those individuals with DLAB scores of 100 or above can learn the easier category I and II languages such as Spanish and French; while those with DLAB scores of 115 and above can successfully learn the more difficult category III and IV languages such as Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean within a reasonable training time. If full language is required, one can count on 24, 36, 44, or even more than 60 weeks of language training.

Still hesitant about language? Remember there are countries in many parts of the world with attaché posts where English is the primary or secondary official language. Among these countries are the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Zimbabwe, India, Pakistan, and Singapore, to name but a few.

Foreign Area Speciality: Many positions call for capabilities possessed by trained foreign area specialists. Programs to train foreign area specialists vary from service to service. Generally speaking however, foreign area specialist training includes training at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, post graduate education, and in selected cases, attendance at intermediate service schools in foreign countries.

Medical Check: You and your family must have a medical screening which reflects your suitability for assignment to a particular country. Medical care and facilities may vary from country to country and in most cases will be different from what you are accustomed to in the United States. If a particular country has inadequate facilities to treat specific medical conditions, it simply makes no sense to send an attaché or a family member suffering from such a condition to that country.

Security: All members of your immediate family (parents, brothers, sisters, children, spouse) must be U.S. citizens. In addition, you and your family must not have close relatives or relations in the prospective host country. Finally, one may not be a naturalized U.S. citizen of the host country being nominated. As you can summarize by this requirement, part of the screening process is a rigorous security investigation of both the nominee and his or her spouse. This is in addition to the normal Defense Investigative Service periodic security clearance update.

When it comes to the issue of security, you may ask the question, "Why does DIA maintain such strict standards relating to citizenship and country of birth?" Consider the following: in many cases the attaché may be the only U.S. military representative in the foreign country. Therefore, the rule is designed as a precautionary measure to preclude conflict of interest situations resulting from either official or unofficial contacts while assigned to a particular overseas mission. It also protects the attaché and his family members from any outside pressures which may arise due to previous affiliations.

Rated Officers: Certain positions within the Defense Attaché System call for either rated officers or C-12 pilots. The rated positions are most frequently found at the O-4 to O-6 level where a requirement exists due to the relationship with the host country. Transition training is available to qualify pilots in flying C-12 aircraft.

HIGHLY DESIRED REQUIREMENTS

These are country-specific requirements which in most cases are developed by DIA country desk officers in coordination with incumbent attachés, based on their knowledge and experience in the country. Keep in mind that the individual requirements discussed below sometimes go unfilled or might be waived on a case-by-case basis depending on the other qualifications of a candidate.

Previous Intelligence Experience: Selected positions call for officers with intelligence backgrounds. A person with intelligence experience coupled with recent experience in a foreign country, may be a prime candidate for the attaché program. Remember, language proficiency may not be a prerequisite, and if required, it will be included in the overall training program developed for you when your nomination is accepted.

Joint Staff, OSD/JCS Experience: Because of the multi-service nature of many of our Defense Attaché Offices (DAOs) and the nature of military counterpart staffs, a qualification of previous joint duty experience may be an important prerequisite.

Miscellaneous Requirements: Certain positions may call for specially qualified officers, such as combat arms or surface warfare specialists, due to the nature of the host country's armed forces or operational requirements. Also, in certain cases being married may be a requirement, and is, generally speaking, desirable, but there are also some attaché assignments that are unaccompanied, or where marital status is not a discriminator.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

What else might you consider if you are thinking about applying to become an attaché? The following is a short list of questions you may want to ask both your assignments manager and yourself before applying.

- In what kind of housing will my family live?
- What type of medical support will we have?
- Are there any financial hardships associated with living at this post?
- What is the school situation for my children?
- Do we enjoy traveling?
- Do I have an appreciation of the dynamics of working in a small independent office which may be at an isolated station?
- Do I consider myself to be a good communicator, both verbal and written?
- Am I interested in new and different challenges which may be out of the norm of my career field?

THE SELECTION PROCESS

The final selection process begins once your parent Service has identified you as a candidate for nomination to fill a specific assignment at some future date. This step can be time consuming, for it involves a great deal of detailed coordination and investigation. The nominee must not only

be approved by the parent Service, but may also require State Department Chief of Mission concurrence, as well as accreditation by the foreign government.

The nomination package is forwarded to DIA's Attaché Personnel Support Branch where it is closely scrutinized to ensure the nominee meets all the general and special requirements of the proposed assignment. If finally approved, you can expect to have a specifically tailored training plan which includes as a minimum: a 12 week attaché course at DIA's Defense Intelligence College; 2-3 weeks of area studies pertaining to your country of assignment; language training (if required); and 10 days of consultations and briefings. Of course, training time varies based on each individual's background, experience, and needs. Key considerations, such as availability date for assignment and in-country on station date, also play an important role in determining total training time.

The selection process is complex and time consuming, but necessarily so in order to insure that only highly qualified officers are selected for attaché duty. The key to starting the process is to contact your assignment officer as soon as you decide that you are interested in the attaché program. Long range planning, persistence, and a dose of patience will go a long way in helping you achieve the attaché assignment you want.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Colonel Douglas S. Thornblom, USA, is currently assigned as a Senior Service College Fellow, Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Service Institute, Rosslyn, Virginia. Colonel Thornblom is a U.S. Army infantryman and foreign area officer (FAO) specializing in Western Europe. He has served as an advisor to a Vietnamese airborne battalion, an instructor at both West Point and the U.S. Army School of the Americas, a Political Military Affairs Officer at JUSMG-MAAG, Spain, and an infantry battalion commander. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy and holds a Masters Degree in Spanish from Middlebury College, Vermont. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at the U.S. Army School of the Americas.

Major James J. Grzella, USA, is currently assigned as the Chief, Attaché Personnel Support Branch, Defense Intelligence Agency, Washington, DC. Major Grzella is a U.S. Army personnel officer and foreign area officer (FAO) specializing in Northeast Asia. He has served in a wide variety of personnel assignments and most recently completed a tour of duty as the Liaison Officer, Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense assigned to the JUSMAG, Korea. He is a graduate of Norwich University and holds a Masters Degree in Public Administration from Western Kentucky University. He is also a graduate of both the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and Korean Army Staff college.