
The Role of the International Military Student Officer

By

Borys Prokopovych

Host . . . Counsellor . . . Diplomat . . . Administrator . . . Tour Guide . . . all of these are professionals in their own right. But, for a limited group of Naval Supply Systems Command (NAVSUP) personnel, all of these and more are just a part of the challenging, rewarding, uplifting, and exciting group of unrelated duties which go with the title of International Military Student Officer (IMSO).

This is a collateral duty one must love, for no standards exist to adequately describe the wide range of required knowledge, skills, and abilities that IMSOs provide as a normal part of their day. As NAVSUP's representative for the International Military Student (IMS), the IMSO serves as the central point of contact for the students from the first notice alerting the IMSO of a pending student arrival to the final homeward bound plane. The IMSO coordinates travel, training, and cultural tours, and promotes experiences to give the students a broad view of the American people and their culture.

Within NAVSUP, two major types of international military training programs exist: follow-on training to the Foreign Officer Supply Course (FOSCO) for Lieutenants, Junior Grade, to Lieutenant Commanders, and the Supply Management course for Senior Foreign Officers sponsored by the Commander, Naval Supply Systems Command (COMNAVSUPSYSCOM). The "Seniors" course is an annual course in logistics/supply management for Commander to Admiral rank, and was first established 30 years ago by the Chief of the Supply Corps. The first and last weeks of this eight-week course are held at NAVSUP, with the balance conducted variously at: NSACO, Athens, Georgia; NTSC, Orlando, Florida; NAVILCO and ASO, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; SPCC and FMSO, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania; NSC Charleston, South Carolina; and at the Canadian National Defense Headquarters in Ottawa, which includes a visit to the Canadian Forces Base in Halifax. This course is intended to mix a professional environment with experience in U.S. customs and culture, thus engendering better personal understanding and fostering the development of lasting friendships. [For a related article, see, "The 30th Annual Supply Management Course for Senior Foreign Officers," which follows this article.]

It is the Command International Military Student Officer at these locations who plans, organizes, and administers scheduled events, and escorts the international military officers enrolled in these training programs. These varied responsibilities are formalized in two courses for IMSOs: the Training Officer courses provided by the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM), and the Cross-Cultural Communications course at the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. In addition, all Navy IMSOs and assistant IMSOs meet together in an annual Department of the Navy nationwide conference which is similar to executive seminars in private industry, and which provide the opportunity to exchange ideas, review program and policy changes, and participate in workshops based on actual experiences which enhance skills and improve communications. To insure continuity and overall program management, NAVSUP IMSOs meet twice each year, at different locations, to plan and finalize each Senior course. This commitment has resulted in a course which is recognized throughout the world for its professionalism.

The IMSO has one of the most challenging and demanding jobs in the Security Assistance Training Program (SATP) since he/she is continuously called upon to accomplish tasks generally

unlike those performed anywhere else in the military. These tasks are critical to the success of the SATP objectives which are:

- to create or enhance a foreign country's ability to perform its role in a manner consistent with U.S. multinational strategy or as may be indicated in treaties, or other international agreements;
- to assist the foreign country in developing expertise needed for effective management and operation of its defense establishment or an element thereof;
- to create skills needed for effective operation and maintenance of equipment acquired from the U.S. through Foreign Military Sales (FMS), the Military Assistance Program (MAP), or direct commercial sales from U.S. vendors;
- to promote U.S. military rapport with the armed forces of the foreign country;
- to promote the foreign policy, security, and general welfare of the United States by assisting people of various countries in their efforts toward economic development and enhancement of internal and external security; and,
- to promote better understanding of the United States, including its people, political system, and other institutions.

In addition to the training received under SATP, International Military Students are given the opportunity to participate in the Informational Program (IP). The objective of this program is to give international military students a balanced understanding of U.S. society, institutions, and goals. The Department of the Navy considers the Informational Program to be equally important to the military training an IMS receives. To this end, the Department of Defense has established twelve objectives for the Informational Program—designed to allow the IMS personal contact and observation of our governmental and cultural institutions. The areas covered are.

- U.S. Governmental Institutions
- The Judicial System
- Political Parties
- Press
- Diversity of American Life—sporting events, entertainment centers, trips to cities, etc.
- Minorities
- Agriculture
- Economy
- Labor
- Education
- Public and Social Welfare
- Human Rights.

The IMSO is primarily responsible for the success of the Informational Program. Through his knowledge, initiative, and personal interest, the IMSO is in a position to make a strong impression regarding what the international students see, hear, and remember during their stay in the United States.

There are five major areas of which an IMSO must be particularly aware. These include language, culture, money, time, and etiquette. Spending upwards of 14 to 18 hours a day with the international students builds close relationships in a relatively short period of time. Students invariably turn discussions towards personal life, family, and religion, as they try to understand the IMSO as a person, not merely a government representative. How the IMSO responds serves

as a barometer of how he/she views the student guests, and it is noted, if not commented on, by the students.

For most IMSs, it will be their first time in our country and they generally prepare well in advance for their visit. It is not surprising that they often know a great deal about the United States. During the tour, the IMSO is frequently called upon to field questions about the United States, its institutions, its economy, its political system, free press, and a host of other topics which, as a representative of the U.S. government, the IMSO should be sufficiently familiar to discuss. This entails considerable reading and study prior to a visit. The time spent in such IMSO preparation is usually after normal duty hours, since IMSO's generally have a full-time assignment apart from IMSO duty.

Escorting a group of international officers of various ranks from a number of countries, each with separate cultures, languages, and values, is not the same as escorting a U.S. group to a function. The IMSO is on duty. While others go home, after eight hours, the IMSO is just starting part two of his day. He must be aware, at all times, of the various nationalities of his group and be current on the political, economic, religious, and cultural difference among them. What may seem humorous to one officer, may be an insult to another. It is important that those not directly involved understand the balancing act an IMSO must perform and the potential negative impact that an IMSO's actions, or inactions, may have on the students.

Being an International Military Student Officer is not a job for everyone. Patience, energy, ingenuity, friendliness, optimism, and a willingness to put aside a personal life for the duration of your visitor's stay are all prerequisites. Those who expect monetary rewards need not apply. An IMSO does a lot of work which is paid for in satisfied and grateful students. He provides time, understanding, and even personal expense to make the visit as rewarding as possible. The most important point to remember is that international students who take courses in the United States are among the best their country can send since it is expensive to attend, both in time lost from work at home, as well as travel, per diem, and course costs. International Military Students should be treated as guests in your home. The benefits of making international friends has a long-term effect. The Lieutenant in a class today may well be an Admiral or even a President of his country in the future. His impressions of the United States, through the activities of the IMSO, may well be reflected in his country's relations with the United States tomorrow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Borys Prokopovych is the Director, Special Services Division, U.S. Navy International Logistics Control Office, Philadelphia, PA. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Communications from Temple University, Philadelphia. For the past ten years he has served as the Foreign Training Officer for NAVILCO. In 1987, he received the prestigious Chief of Naval Operations Foreign Training Officer of the Year award.