

MILITARY: Officers prep for Afghanistan with cultural and language training

By Mark Walker

Camp Pendleton officers about to take command of U.S. Marine Corps operations in Afghanistan were putting one more arrow into their quivers last week, studying the country's customs and practicing key Pashto language phrases. "Zema noom General Osterman dac," Brig. Gen. Joseph Osterman said as he drilled in the correct Pashto way to say "My name is General Osterman."



Camp Pendleton's Brig. Gen. Joseph Osterman, foreground, and other Marine officers practice Pashto language phrases under the tutelage of Salem Samim in preparation for their upcoming work in Afghanistan. (Photo by Mark Walker - Staff Photographer)

Cultural Learning based in Quantico, Va., taught some of the nuances of Afghan culture. "Afghanistan has a very, very complex society," Samim said during a break. "And teaching a Marine to understand Afghan culture is not an easy task." But what they are able to absorb and use will help determine the degree of rapport they are able to establish, Samim said.

"This is important because it's a war of perception and ideas as much as anything else," he said.

The Marines also learned about the "jirga," a kind of community council jury system used to resolve disputes. Opposing parties choose a mediator, such as a tribal elder or religious leader, to hear the details of the complaint. That mediator then forms the jirga, which can range from a handful of people to as many as 100.

The jirga's finding is final.

It could come into play, Samim said, if a Marine Humvee strikes and kills an Afghan pedestrian or a farmer's livestock. Villagers could ask that such matters be decided by the jirga, but military commanders must agree. "Marines often are surprised by this at first, but it's the way most things are decided in Afghanistan," he said. "The government really has no power outside the urban areas, and 80 percent of the population lives in the villages."

'One tribe at a time'

Iraqi and Afghan cultural and language training have been part of pre-deployment training since 2005. It's part of the overall U.S. strategy of winning over the people and defeating the insurgencies, which have kept at war since

Osterman will direct battlefield operations beginning in April under the command of Camp Pendleton's Maj. Gen. Richard Mills. The two generals will lead about 11,000 leathernecks operating primarily in the country's Helmand province. About 4,500 of those troops are deploying from Camp Pendleton and Miramar Marine Corps Air Station. The officers practiced their language skills Wednesday under the tutelage of Salem Samim, an Afghan who fled to Pakistan after the Taliban took control in 1996.

Samim stressed the importance of various phrases and using the honorific "sahib" when talking with government, military or religious leaders. "It elevates the person's status, and by using a Pashto word, it sends a good signal to the Afghan people," he told the group assembled inside a small office at the headquarters of the base's 1st Marine Division.

'War of perception'

Earlier in the week, Samim and other instructors working for the Marine Corps' Center for Advanced Operational

2001. The instruction is akin to medicine, said one of the instructors, Hamid Lellou.

“It’s like when you go to the physician because you want to get better,” he said. “We are cultural doctors who design a curriculum to fit the needs of the Marines.” Salim grew up in eastern Afghanistan and trained as an engineer. He worked with the fundamentalist Taliban government, but quickly ran afoul of its religious extremism, he said.

After fleeing to Pakistan, he was granted asylum in the U.S. before America invaded Afghanistan and routed the Taliban in the weeks immediately after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Ultimate success for the U.S. and its NATO partners is winning the confidence of the villages and the elders and religious leaders who rule them, Salim said. “There are 30,000 villages, and each has its own way of doing things,” he said. “Those villages is where it will be determined if the mission succeeds or fails.”

With a centuries-old history of invaders stretching back to Alexander the Great, Afghans have a natural suspicion of any foreigners, he said. “While many Afghans understand the U.S. has a reason to be there because of what happened on 9/11, they are still suspicious. “You have to win them over one tribe at a time,” he said.

‘Anxious to get started’

After practicing his Pashto for about three hours, Osterman said he expects it will prove invaluable. “I’ve picked up a ton of stuff,” he said. “I was in the country conducting site surveys 10 days ago and we had a ‘shura’ with about 25 elders. It would have been really handy to have it then.” A “shura” is a meeting of tribal leaders that U.S. military commanders take part in frequently.

The shura Osterman attended was a prelude to the Marine Corps’ invasion of the Marjah area of the southern Helmand province that began on Friday. As the Camp Pendleton Marines near their departure date in late March, Osterman said the command staff of about 250 is ready.

“We’ve come together really well and now we’re getting anxious to get there and get started,” he said.