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WANTED:

AN “INTELLIGENT” USE OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

by Lieutenant General Samuel V. Wilson, USA (Ret)

*President Emeritus, Hampden-Sydney College
& Wheat Professor of Leadership*

It's all about relationships

— Colonel Tom Wilhelm, US Defense Attaché, Ulaanbaatar

Every human has as his birthright, unless he forfeits it, to be treated with respect and decency — Anonymous.

The Long An Province Chief accepted the joss sticks and solemnly moved to the front of the coffin. Members of the grieving family and friends of the slain South Vietnamese policeman watched from their seats around the walls of the bamboo hut. The Province Chief—a Vietnamese Army Colonel—lit the end of the sticks with a Zippo. They shot out an incandescent spray like a child's Fourth-of-July “sparkler.” Waving the fiery wands over the coffin, he began a sing-song chant. With my limited Vietnamese, I could not grasp its meaning.

Suddenly he stopped, turned, and handed the burning sticks to me. I was momentarily dumb-struck. Then, copying his slow and measured movements, I took his place at the head of the coffin and began waving the sticks in small circles over the body of the fallen policeman, all the while reciting the Lord's Prayer. In the middle of my instinctive act of condolence a furtive glance at the Colonel, nodding his approval, told me I was doing all right.

During the return helicopter ride over the Mekong Delta to the provincial capital at Tan An, I recalled a scene from an earlier war. It was in the spring of 1944. A long-range penetration group of American volunteers—initially and intentionally designated the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional)—was spearheading a larger US-trained Chinese force on the final leg of a campaign that started far behind the Japanese lines in North Burma.

Our already battered and undermanned outfit was on its way to seize the Japanese all-weather fighter strip at Myitkyina. The mission would secure vital friendly air transport routes over “the hump” into China and hasten the Allied linkup with the Burma Road. We followed traces of ancient, long-unused mountain tracks known only to the indigenous Kachins. The Japanese prudently blocked all other known trail approaches to the airfield. We had to cross the serrated ridges of the Kumon Mountains that jabbed long fingers southward into Burma from the Himalayas.

After six days of a backbreaking climb up rain-drenched mountainsides, inching our way around daunting cliffs, we reached the Naura Hkyat Pass. With a merciful fog shrouding

the valleys below, it was safe to build campfires to dry out clothing and equipment, with fleeting comfort from the high-mountain cold.

Knowing that radio reception would be enhanced at such altitudes, especially at night, we downloaded the mule-packed short-wave radio in my Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon — we called this AN/PRC-1, “Becky.” The communications sergeant began experimenting with the antenna to see what we might pick up. The broadcast spectrum was alive with signals — BBC, Radio Australia, Radio Manila, Singapore, Bangkok, a separate call sign alleging to emanate from Radio Free Calcutta, Chinese language radio broadcasts, and Japanese-controlled Radio Rangoon. Then, through the crackling static, a barely audible, distant voice announced *Govorit Moskva* — “Moscow calling.”

...along that vast, thousand-mile-plus Soviet-German Front, the hostilities were wreaking human suffering and devastation to an extent that we could scarcely imagine.

One of the soldiers listening by the fire quickly held up his hand and said: “Wait. Hold that frequency.” An American muleskinner of Russian parentage, he began interpreting the words. Even the knowledge that we were eavesdropping on propagandized Soviet battle communiqués could not obscure the sheer scale of the war taking place along that vast, thousand-mile-plus Soviet-German Front. The hostilities were wreaking human suffering and devastation to an extent that we could scarcely imagine from our perch on Naura Hkyat Pass.

I can almost remember my exact words to the little band of ragged warriors around that mountain campfire. “When this is all over,” I declared, “I’m going to go home and study Russian. Then I will somehow get myself assigned to Moscow as an assistant military attaché. I want to understand how

those people have been able to fight so long and so hard to defend their homeland.”

When the war in the Pacific ended, I did exactly that. In early September 1947, I reported to Columbia University’s Russian Institute in New York City to begin the first phase of the US Army’s four-year Foreign Area Specialist Training Program (Russian), subsequently renamed the Foreign Area Officer Program (FAOP).

Over the next three-and-a-half decades, as a Russian Foreign Area Officer, I had many opportunities to tell that World War II story to Russian audiences, including senior representatives of the Soviet military high command. The inspiration that came to me while listening to *Govorit Moskva* on a mountain in Burma never failed to elicit a deep, sometimes intensely emotional response from them. Against a background of deep mistrust of all things western, including a certain national inferiority complex betrayed by a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude, they appeared to hear in my story a sincere empathy for the massive sacrifices undergone by the Soviet peoples during the “Great Fatherland War.” On occasion, I could even feel genuine warmth in their attitudes toward me.

Indeed, at an evening social in Moscow in the early 1970’s, when I was serving as the first incumbent of the newly-established position of US Defense Attaché to the Soviet Union, a mid-level Soviet officer tipped his glass and said to me: “You not only know our history, our stories and our poetry, Samuel, Son of Jasper. You have studied our battles and can even sing our songs. We sometimes almost forget who you really are. Almost.”

...the stranger in their midst, who knows even a smattering of the language and some feel for the local culture has a marked advantage.

So, what is the point of my oft-told story? It is this: however varied the culture and racial background, people everywhere seek a sense of group identity and meaning. All have a need for recognition and appreciation of their individual and collective worth. The foreign visitor, the stranger in their midst, who knows even a smattering of the language and some feel for the local culture — who can come in on that wave length — has a marked advantage. These skills are everywhere prerequisite to developing the rapport that precedes mutual understanding and acceptance, and possibly some form of sharing and cooperation. They give us the ability to do the right thing when handed a fistful of burning joss sticks.

Not long ago, retired US Air Force Colonel Owen Greenblatt reminisced about sitting unobtrusively along the wall in the Joint Chiefs of Staff conference room (“the tank”) in the

1970’s. He was taking notes while I, back from Moscow on one of my periodic consultation visits, related to the assembled Chiefs my observations on Soviet military philosophy, strategy and doctrine all gleaned from informal conversations with their Soviet counterparts. Such conversations could not have risen to a level of direct interest to the Joint Chiefs without long years of preparation on my part. Learning to appreciate and understand the Russians themselves, their history, culture, and art is not a short tour.

There are far more notable examples of American representatives navigating the nuances in foreign cultures to enhance our knowledge and understanding, all the while making vital contributions — in diplomatic, military, and intelligence arenas — to our national security. The giants in this arena belong largely to the US Foreign Service. Russian linguist and learned Sovietologist George F. Kennan, with a series of cables from Moscow beginning in 1946, provided profoundly insightful analyses of Soviet intentions.

Kennan’s perceptions molded and under-girded US Cold War policy for decades. Two distinguished foreign service colleagues followed in Kennan’s footsteps: Ambassadors Charles F. “Chip” Bohlen and Llewellyn E. Thompson, both long-term Russian experts. They acted, in turn, as diplomatically accredited and trustworthy conduits to Soviet policymakers in the Kremlin and kept a succession of US presidents from possibly grievous errors. These are examples of great American public servants whose contributions to US overseas national interests have been truly historic. There are others. Some are to be found in the chronicles of the Central Intelligence Agency. For example, none who knew him could ever forget the soft-spoken George Kiewewalter, one of the greatest case officers in the Agency’s history.

Senior US military figures have also made invaluable contributions. Names like General Joseph W. Stilwell (China specialist), Major General Frank D. Merrill (a Japanese language officer), General Maxwell D. Taylor (a multi-linguist), Lieutenant General Vernon A. “Dick” Walters (a multi-linguist) and Major General Edward G. Lansdale (with deep knowledge of the Philippines and Viet Nam) come quickly to mind.

Less well known are the mid-level officers, and in some instances non-commissioned officers, serving abroad in US attaché offices, advisory groups, military missions and mobile training teams. These professionals, language qualified, culturally sensitive, and for the most part seldom recognized, deserve our special remembrance and gratitude. They have been important far beyond their numbers in projecting American values, ferreting out critical intelligence and sometimes even influencing the course of events in ways that they themselves may not have recognized at the time. Examples abound. One of my favorites is Angus Mundy.

The third vehicle in the Syrian armored column crossing the border into Lebanon in the pre-dawn hours of Sunday, 1 June 1976, was a battered old Mercedes driven by the US Defense Attaché to Damascus, US Army Colonel Angus Mundy. An Arabic speaking Foreign Area Officer (FAO), Mundy seemed to understand the Syrians perhaps better than they understood themselves. A little more than 24 hours later, Colonel Mundy's eyewitness observations on the Syrian occupation of Lebanon were being briefed to the JCS Chairman in his Pentagon office.

Army Colonel Alfred Prados graduated from the FAO program at the American University of Beirut in 1962. His military career thereafter unfolded almost entirely in the Middle East. Al Prados moved through that area with all the deftness and ease of a second-hand camel trader, earning himself the patronymic name of "Abu Faris" from his Arab classmates at the Jordanian Staff College. His spot reports from the field were well received in Washington and read with marked benefit at senior policy levels.

Somewhat after Prados' time came the legendary Colonel Lawrence Thompson, speaking fluent Arabic in the local idiom of Rabat and Marrakech. When I asked the American Chief of Mission in Rabat in 1977 how Colonel Thompson was doing, Ambassador Newsom replied: "General, we do not deserve Larry Thompson."

Another remarkable figure cut of the same cloth was Major Denny Howley. During the in-country phase of his language and area training Howley backpacked alone and on foot from Morocco across North Africa through the Middle East to the Afghan border, living with desert tribesmen along his route. Several years later, I was to marvel as Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements cleared his office of assembled staff officers and advisors in order to talk directly with Major Howley about a crisis then looming in Beirut.

I recall vividly the brilliant reporting of a US defense attaché to India, who had become a favorite polo-playing partner of Field Marshall Sam Manekshaw, the then-Chief of Staff of the Indian Army. And I especially remember the US defense attaché (with his lovely, talented wife) in Cambodia — posted to Thailand in the mid-70's — to whom senior indigenous military officers turned, by the dozens, for assistance and advice. Across the Pacific, there was the young Army lieutenant colonel, requested by name by a newly elected South American president, who wanted his erstwhile classmate from Fort Leavenworth's Command and General Staff College by his side.

I could go on and on. The roster of these storied lives is still being written. Even so, it has much to teach us. But only if we take the time to learn what the individual stories mean; if we are willing to listen to them.

An important observation to be made at this juncture is that success stories like these, especially those involving military officers at company and field grade ranks, are in many instances serendipitous — unforeseen and unplanned. These individuals drew on their own initiative, invested time and effort in acquiring new languages and explored other cultures, often at considerable risk. While they sought opportunities in the few existing programs available to aid them in their quest, the outcomes were more often shaped by chance. To our great benefit, the knowledge and skills they accrued over the years gave them a cutting edge when overseas assignments presented the opportunity to establish crucial relationships with host country representatives in areas key to US interests. On a somber note, however, the majority of these officers have been poorly rewarded professionally. After spending careers in that murky and dangerous void between peace and war, frequently without their families and under conditions of great hardship, they have been and continue to be retired from active military service at relatively junior ranks, virtually unrecognized by their parent military service.

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That wise old Arabist Angus Mundy retired as an Army colonel and became an assistant librarian at Kansas State University; the redoubtable Denny Howley retired as a major. It is clear that personnel systems are not programmed to recognize the highly singular services of the Army's Foreign Area Officers and their counterparts in the other services. This neglect imposes a cost we can ill afford.

Inexplicably, the programs under which some of these officers spent as much as four years preparing themselves to become foreign language qualified and area knowledgeable specialists have long ago been truncated or in certain instances terminated. Explanations for the lack of official interest in these programs are varied. Some have to do with perennial budgetary considerations. The fact that the four-year diversion from a promising officer's normal career track places him well behind the advancement curve of his professional contemporaries is a significant deterrent — but it is one that can and should be remedied.

Developing and sustaining the capability exemplified by these officers cannot take the place of our military's coiled iron fist — but it clearly precedes its use and takes over in the aftermath. Ironically, current national defense priorities emphasize investment in technology and hardware in an era when a prudent investment in our best people might

conceivably help us to avoid the mistakes of the recent past. Reliance on technology and “smart” systems to fight successfully within the conditions of “asymmetrical” warfare must be tempered by the deliberate cultivation and adroit use of the human mind and spirit. Only then can we talk seriously about revitalizing our practice of the world’s second oldest profession: HUMINT.

It is human intelligence in all its many guises — both in predisposition and in performance — that can give us the vital, confirming clues to the intentions of potential adversaries and allies. Through “smart” use of HUMINT we may truly and skillfully, with far less cost, pre-empt those actions that could be harmful to our national security interests. And do so long before the clarion calls us to action on the battlefield.

In the 21st century we find ourselves in a new war of ideas, our primary enemy the shadowy Islamist terrorist. To prevail will require a greater premium on sound intelligence than we have ever been willing to place. We will have to rely especially on HUMINT. Useful human intelligence requires a substantial investment of time and resources. We must nurture and reward those motivated professionals willing to devote years to

refining the uncommon ability to cross the barriers that divide the world’s cultures. With that, and a keen sense for connecting with the human spirit, they will be prepared to simultaneously harvest information and sow mutual respect around the globe, whenever an opportunity presents itself.

The stories bear witness. Our best are willing to go. The choice to prepare them, properly, is ours to make.

Note: Wilhelm quote is from Robert D. Kaplan’s The Imperial Grunts, page 129 (Random House, New York 2005.) In its original form it read: “There is nothing to build here except relationships.”

The second,” anonymous” quote belongs to the writer.



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