

Learning from the Other End of the Spectrum: Lessons from the Peace Corps Applicable to Stability Operations

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Abstract

Though increasingly called upon to participate in long term humanitarian operations directly related to development, most American soldiers are not trained to work at the village level in projects such as the creation of microenterprises or teaching farmers sustainable agricultural techniques that could notably improve the quality of life for some of the world's poorest people. The Peace Corps, with years of experience in grassroots projects, can serve as a resource for soldiers who need to acquire these new skills. Additionally, when contemplating future development missions, the military could possibly benefit from incorporating all or parts of the Peace Corps' stated three goals: helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women, helping promote a better understanding on the part of the people served, and helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

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Other than both being part of the government, the U.S. military and the Peace Corps are perhaps two of the most dissimilar organizations one could imagine. The military, with about 1.4 million people in uniform, has a budget in the hundreds of billions; the Peace Corps, with about 8,000 volunteers, has a budget in the hundreds of millions.^{1,2,3} The military, bristling with high tech weaponry, has as its primary purpose to provide national security; the Peace Corps, very low tech, strives to promote goodwill with others. Yet, despite being polar extremes, or maybe because they are so different, the two organizations can learn a great deal from one another.

As the military moves from its traditional role of mainly being an armed protector to one that also emphasizes stability operations at the individual and community levels, exemplified by Army Field Manual 3-0 released in February 2008, it would be helpful to look for practical experience from an organization that has been involved in just such grassroots endeavors for over four decades, the Peace Corps. During that time nearly 200,000 volunteers have served in 139 countries teaching people how to farm using sustainable techniques, staffing health clinics in rural areas, teaching science in schools that lack teachers, and working in numerous other projects to help nations develop. Many projects were successful, but there were also many failures along the way. Fortunately the Peace Corps often learns from these mistakes so as not to repeat them. It would be extremely beneficial for

the military to take advantage of that cumulative knowledge in order to replicate the successes and avoid the failures.

The goal is not to turn the soldier into a Peace Corps volunteer but rather to borrow from the Peace Corps those skills that will make the soldier working in nation building a more capable individual. He or she will still be a soldier, albeit one who will have the abilities to work side-by-side with host country nationals to get the job done, be it reclaiming environmentally degraded land, establishing aquaculture projects, or teaching children who have lost their parents to AIDS.

There are those who question the wisdom of having soldiers so heavily involved in stability operations. Some feel such tasks are better assigned to the State Department or NGO's. However, as Secretary of Defense Gates recently stated regarding humanitarian missions, "it is not a soldier's job [but] sometimes only a soldier can do it."⁴

Field Manual 3-0 puts in writing the increased emphasis on stability operations, including humanitarian assistance, expected of the army. A portion of the manual's introduction places into perspective exactly how important the army views such operations:

Success in future conflicts will require the protracted application of all the instruments of national power – diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. Because of this, Army doctrine now equally weights tasks dealing with the population – stability or civil support – with those related to offensive and defensive operations. This parity is critical; it recognizes that 21st century conflict involves more than combat between armed opponents. While defeating the opponent with offensive and defensive operations, Army forces simultaneously shape the broader situation through nonlethal actions to restore security and normalcy to the people.⁵

Where the Peace Corps and NGO's can provide the humanitarian assistance to bring "normalcy to the people" as FM 3-0 states, it should be mainly those organizations, and not the military, doing so. Unfortunately there are areas within countries and sometimes entire countries which could benefit from a Peace Corps presence but because of violence are unsafe for the placement of volunteers. In such situations it may fall upon the armed forces of the United States to provide the necessary expertise. Iraq, Afghanistan, parts of Latin America, and as AFRICOM stands up, parts of Africa, are some of the places soldiers may need to perform at least some of the functions of the Peace Corps.

Although the Peace Corps can also learn from the military, this paper will only examine how the military can learn from the Peace Corps. In doing so it is helpful to look at the latter's three goals:

- 1. Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.**
- 2. Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.**
- 3. Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.⁶**

None of these Peace Corps goals are mutually exclusive with the military goal of national security. In fact it is hoped that through development efforts and sharing experiences among different cultures the likelihood of war can be significantly reduced.

Training

One trains with weapons and in hand-to-hand combat, the other learns a foreign language and culture. In the end one is prepared to go off to war, the other to make friends in foreign lands through school construction, health education, and similar projects. However, with the military's expanding role in stability operations, there are some aspects of Peace Corps training that soldiers might want to incorporate into their own programs in order to better prepare for future humanitarian missions.

Many special operations forces, to their credit, already incorporate language and culture training. Unfortunately for the military at large such instruction for soldiers is frequently a few key foreign phrases, some guidance on how to avoid offending anyone, and a cheat sheet summarizing the culture. There has, however, been a renewed emphasis on having more bilingual officers and NCO's, and progress appears to be occurring in this endeavor.

In contrast, Peace Corps training is quite in-depth regarding language and culture. This is in large part because a volunteer is expected to be able to train a host country counterpart to take over the volunteer's assignment, such as serving as a science teacher in a village school, for when the volunteer completes his or her two year assignment and returns home to the states. Additional lectures on health, safety, politics and other topics help round out the training.

Many volunteers arrive in country already equipped with a practical set of skills. They are nurses, foresters, farmers and others whose civilian occupations can readily be utilized in the developing world. For those who do not arrive with useful

expertise, Peace Corps may provide additional training, perhaps in small-scale farming, public health methods, or another skill where basic principles can be learned in a relatively short period of time.

Looking at Peace Corps training there are several areas where the military could possibly adopt some of their methods when possible. These include:

- Providing language and additional training at a center in the host country. This allows training by native speakers and immersion in the language and culture before being sent out to various areas within the country on assignment.**
- Having soldiers live with host families during language training. Following language class each day this is an excellent way for the beginning speaker to incorporate new words and phrases in a real life setting. It also allows a soldier to experience firsthand the cultural intricacies of their new assignments and to immediately make friends with local people. The host family also learns what an American soldier is really like as opposed to possibly distorted impressions they may have from movies and television.**
- Providing training for possible humanitarian projects. During the time soldiers are at the training center they could be learning how to create a fish farm, reclaim environmentally degraded land, start a women's cooperative, or other useful skill that could be used to assist the local people when the soldier is deployed to another area within that country. Which soldiers would be designated for this special training would depend on such factors as their interest, aptitude and projected amount of time available to work on**

development projects at their assigned locations. While civil affairs units would seem to be natural choices for such training, it is possible other units, such as infantry in certain situations, should also be considered.

Security concerns would be paramount if placing individual soldiers in the homes of host country nationals. However, it is important to note it has been the experience of the Peace Corps that not only the families but often the local communities are quite protective of their volunteers.

In order to maximize their cross cultural experience as well as language training it is important to place only one soldier per family. Having two Americans under the same household will result in English being spoken and decreased interaction with the family; having just one essentially forces that person to learn to speak the local language.

While living in the home of host country nationals is optimal for learning both the language and culture, if not feasible for security concerns or issues related to command and control of personnel, an option could be placing the soldier in his or her own home but relatively close to a host family. That way the soldier could regularly visit for language practice and to become acquainted with local customs.

Training Host Country Nationals

The work of the civil affairs and other units is incredibly helpful in promoting goodwill among peoples, and their efforts and accomplishments are in no way belittled or disparaged by having another model for humanitarian efforts. Civil affairs frequently has projects which provide a large impact, such as vaccination

programs or health clinics, that are put in place for a short period of time, maybe two weeks or so, utilizing a contingent of soldiers, though there certainly are exceptions. Host country nationals may or may not receive training, depending on the project.

The Peace Corps model is quite different. Volunteers are at an assigned location, frequently quite remote, for approximately two years. Having such a long time at a site enables them to plan for relatively long term projects as well as to train host country nationals to continue with the projects when the volunteers leave. Additionally, with such an extended period a volunteer can often see a project go through several iterations, enabling that individual to work on continual refinements. As an example, a first try at a fish farm may come up short, but with additional attempts incorporating lessons learned success can often be achieved.

Another difference between a Peace Corps project and maybe one from a civil affairs unit is the lack of resources available to the former. Whereas a civil affairs unit might bring in generators, tents, soldiers with various construction skills, food, and so forth; a volunteer, especially one in a remote site, might lack electricity, modern tools, and the technical talents of others. Resourcefulness becomes an essential trait if the volunteer wants to accomplish a demanding project.

Perhaps the biggest difference between Peace Corps projects and those performed by the military is that Peace Corps always expects the volunteer to train a host country counterpart to continue the project when the volunteer leaves. Though many military humanitarian efforts involve training host country nationals, not all of them do. Some involve American soldiers showing up, drilling a well, and

moving on to the next town; or vaccinating a village and moving on; or a host of other short term projects which essentially involve the military doing something for the locals instead of training the locals to eventually do something for themselves. This is not to criticize these projects; they are extremely beneficial and frequently, because of resource requirements, unable to be accomplished by the Peace Corps, NGO's, or host government. They are, however, quite different than the model of development, which emphasizes factors such as sustainability and host country participation, the Peace Corps uses.

The lessons learned from volunteers in long term projects such as fish farming and developing teaching plans for a biology class in a school that has no microscopes could be valuable for soldiers who generally have not participated in such endeavors. The skills in setting up a mobile field hospital, though critical for the military, are not the same as establishing a women's cooperative and training someone to continue it when the volunteer returns to the states. Should the military shift some of their humanitarian emphasis toward longer term projects at a grassroots level, as might occur in less developed countries where there are plans for a continuing presence of US troops, it would benefit from looking at what Peace Corps volunteers have done in the realm of training host country nationals and how they did it.

Promoting an Understanding of America

Peace Corps' volunteers promote America in a positive manner by working at the grassroots level, helping the local people with humanitarian projects, speaking the local language, and dealing with an almost insatiable curiosity many people have

about Americans by answering their questions. Volunteers are often described as goodwill ambassadors representing the United States.

With soldiers increasingly involved in stability operations activities it's important that they take the opportunity not only to succeed with their projects but to also build good rapport with the local people. Taking a cue from the Peace Corps, learning the local language goes a long way to building bridges between cultures. This needs to be more than the few transliterated phrases printed on the back of a card; it needs to be enough to converse at a level that the American working on a project can share some basic experiences with his or her counterparts and in turn understand much of what the counterparts are saying about their own lives.

Soldiers also need to become part of the local community. This is difficult if they are all living in a guarded compound, so when possible they should consider living with host country families. They should also take part in local events such as community celebrations. If possible they should play sports with the locals. Years from now when that soldier has long since left that community people might still be talking about how a member of the American military played soccer with the local kids.

Equipped with basic language and cultural skills soldiers will most likely discover what many Peace Corps volunteers find when dealing with host country nationals, that there is a certain tolerance provided for mistakes. When the soldier uses the male pronoun instead of the female when speaking the language, or seems to have incredibly poor soccer skills for someone who is 22 years old, chances are the locals will help that person out. There might be some good natured laughing,

and hopefully the soldier can laugh at his or her own mistakes, but in the end there is usually tolerance, help, the development of friendships, and an improvement of America's image abroad.

Bringing the World Back Home

Of Peace Corps' three goals it is probably the third, often simply stated as "bringing the world back home," that the American military has most fallen short in implementing. Troops return to the states and perhaps share with family and friends how the food might have been different in Kenya or the style of dress in Tanzania, but there appears to be no concerted effort to share their findings with the public. Peace Corps on the other hand encourages its returned volunteers to go into schools and other public places to speak about their experiences and findings. Along with pictures a volunteer might bring some traditional food to share or traditional dress to show, and will probably discuss the customs of the people he or she lived with for two years. These activities go a long way to clear up misperceptions Americans may have about others.

A similar undertaking by even a fraction of the tens of thousands of soldiers who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan would be extremely beneficial. The news carries a great deal about the fighting and the politics but precious little about how the Iraqis and Afghans live their day to day lives. Talks by returning soldiers could help Americans better understand the intricacies of how Iraqi and Afghani culture relate to the ongoing combat operations. Why do some Afghani villagers support the Taliban over democracy? Why is there animosity between Sunni and Shiite Iraqis?

How do Afghans and Iraqis really feel about Americans? These and other questions beg to be explained by people who have been to the villages and worked hard to establish good rapport with the locals. Sweeping statements by politicians that relations are good are just that...sweeping statements. However, hearing from a young sergeant how he became close to an Iraqi family that shared both their hopes for freedom and their fears of ongoing violence is a much more powerful and important message.

Thus, the military needs to work hard to match the Peace Corps' goal of bringing the world back home. It can't be done through announcements from a base public affairs office; it has to be done through individual soldiers speaking at schools, at libraries, at gatherings in homes, and wherever and whenever people will listen. Armed with a better understanding of what is involved in foreign countries, Americans can make informed decisions regarding policies and politics. Additionally, this personal touch might lead people to develop a significantly deeper appreciation of their men and women in uniform.

Maintaining Each Organization's Individuality

Since its inception Peace Corps has striven to maintain its distance from intelligence agencies and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the military. This is not just for philosophical reasons. A volunteer who comes in contact with a member of the intelligence community may appear suspect in the eyes of host country nationals, possibly resulting in their unwillingness to assist with development projects associated with that volunteer, and maybe even placing that volunteer's life in

danger. It's important that Peace Corps be perceived by the foreign country as being there to help, not to spy or participate in political or military activities. Therefore, any training or joint efforts on projects between the Peace Corps and American military must be transparent, for the benefit of improving humanitarian missions, not associated with intelligence gathering, and reviewable by all parties involved including the host country.

It is also important that the overall mission of soldiers not be changed. As an example, if a known terrorist arrived in a village where there were Peace Corps volunteers, the volunteers would not be expected to attempt to capture or kill that person. For soldiers the difference is quite stark. They may be involved in humanitarian operations, but if their mission also includes capturing or killing terrorists, they are expected to do just that.

Where the Two Worlds Already Meet

Either directly or indirectly, the military and the Peace Corps occasionally meet for such activities as joint projects where each side takes advantage of the other's strengths. As an example, a Peace Corps volunteer who is assigned to teach in a rural village may be at a school that was constructed using heavy equipment owned and operated by the American military. These tentative steps towards cooperation are probably precursors towards more involved joint projects in the future.

Language is another area where the Peace Corps and military meet. During the author's travels in Africa on military assignments he frequently encountered Peace Corps volunteers who would be the only people that spoke both English and the

local language in remote villages. Additionally, many of the best American speakers of native languages at U.S. embassies were frequently previous Peace Corps volunteers who had taken positions with the Foreign Service. Finally, numerous foreign government officials who interact with the American military speak English thanks to Peace Corps Volunteers. In one instance an official told the author the name of the first volunteer who taught him English, relating how tough she was, and then mentioned the name of the second volunteer who taught him English, saying she was even tougher. His command of English was excellent and he remembered both volunteers, despite being demanding teachers, quite fondly. Thus, the Peace Corps to an extent paved the way for this person's later dealings with the American military. They did this by teaching him English, introducing him to American culture, and creating a positive image of Americans. Should soldiers find themselves in remote villages for prolonged periods working on similar projects as Peace Corps volunteers, it can be expected, or at least hoped, that the same benefits regarding language training, both for the soldiers and the host country nationals, will accrue.

Learning from the Peace Corps

There are several ways the military could go about learning from the Peace Corps experience in foreign lands. Talking to former volunteers could be one method; talking to present volunteers, because of the chance people might associate them with the military, may not be as easy.

Should the military still want to learn from the Peace Corps but not have any direct contact with staff or volunteers from the organization, it could begin by

accessing the excellent online library the Peace Corps maintains at its website, www.peacecorps.gov. Publications dealing with how to establish a microenterprise, designing and evaluating projects, working in different cultures, teaching English as a second language, and numerous other topics are available for viewing.

Most beneficial for soldiers about to deploy to a country where there are Peace Corps volunteers is to access the online Peace Corps wiki at www.peacecorpswiki.org. Information regarding the country's culture, health and safety, and living conditions is often available. Additionally, many of the country entries also include a suggested packing list and a directory of pertinent online resources.

Perhaps most useful at the Peace Corps wiki site is the very last part of each country's page, where it says external links. This will take the reader to the blogs of the individual volunteers. It would be difficult to find a better set of American perspectives on a country - including topics pertinent to the military such as culture, unexpected obstacles to project completion, and safety - than what these individuals living long term among the local people have written.

Conclusion

It is not the job of the military to replace the Peace Corps in stable regions. Neither organization wants that. However, in areas where there is significant unrest it would be unsafe to place volunteers, and if the United States still wants to provide grassroots stabilizing efforts, the task will fall upon soldiers.

The military mission in stability operations appears to be evolving from one of generally short duration missions with little emphasis on training host country nationals to one involving more long term grassroots efforts. Additionally, in the past stability operations generally did not focus on income generation projects. While drilling wells, building schools, and providing vaccinations certainly contribute to the wealth of a nation, they do not always directly and immediately lead to an increase in people's income the way a women's cooperative selling honey or an aquaculture project selling fish can contribute. Creating microenterprises that help raise the living standards of the poorest people are a large part of the Peace Corps experience. These income generating projects, as well as numerous other grassroots efforts in fields such as environmental protection, education, and health, are all part of the Peace Corps more than forty years in development. It would be unfortunate if the military did not take advantage of this expertise, as well as incorporating at least a sampling of the Peace Corps three goals: train others, promote an understanding of Americans, and bring the world back home.

Disclaimer:

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Notes

¹ “Background Information on Increased Peace Corps Funding,” *Change the World* (7 Aug 2008), <http://www.rpcv.org/pages/sitepage.cfm?id=1210#facts>.

² Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Seeks Record Level in 2009 Budget,” *The New York Times* (3 Feb 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/03/washington/03cnd-military.html?ex=1359781200&en=1dba4b1f2a5b9006&ei=5124&partner=delicious&exprod=delicious>.

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⁶ “About the Peace Corps,” *Peace Corps* (2008), <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=Learn.whatisp.mission>.