

Fort Culture: Cross Cultural *Military* Dynamics & IMSOs

by Cross Cultural Expert, Dr. Culture.

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Dr. Culture (*AKA Dr. Thomas Connell*) is President of Interlink Consulting Services, a firm providing Cross Cultural Communications, International Management Consulting, International Public Relations, Surveillance Technology, International Troubleshooting, and International Personal Security Consulting and Training.

Want a job with *excitement*? One with no routine and operating in an environment of cultural and language differences combined with no-nonsense, real world military training requirements?

Sound demanding? Oh, yea.

Rewarding? Absolutely.

Welcome to the International Military Student Office (IMSO) office. The IMSO officer (often a civilian) is responsible for the 20 - 100 (and sometimes more) international military members and accompanying families who are stationed in the US for training. From nearly every country in the world these international military members -- from enlisted to admirals and generals -- come to the US to learn from the best; from helicopter maintenance or pilot training, to logistics, to international maritime procedures, or Special Forces training -- even attending post graduate degree programs at prestigious US universities.

There are hundreds of IMSO offices throughout the Department of Defense. They are enormously successful due in large part to the efforts of the IMSO and staff who take their work personally *and* are the interface between the international student and the American Culture. Not surprisingly, the student's cultural background sometimes conflicts with the American cultural structure. The IMSO staff routinely tackles sensitive matters with which others would find impossible to handle. From gender issues to locating an apartment to social etiquette and dietary issues, to Muslim prayer time, to speeding tickets, to successful grocery shopping experiences, to "issues" such as an officer prohibiting a male OB-GYN doctor from seeing his wife, ad infinitum.

The really good IMSO offices (*of course!*) call on me to train their students on American Culture thereby eliminating many difficulties and issues *before* they become a problem because the student understands the WHY behind the WHAT Americans do.

In a trusting, no threat environment, I cover it all; the good, the bad and the ugly of American culture. I am sometimes asked easy questions:

"How can you put your elderly father, *the patriarch of your family*, into an old folks home?" (Answer: "It's easy -- you don't know my father....")

Other times it is difficult to explain American cultural components -- or other Americans. And, sometimes, I am the one who learns.

For instance, I was at the Coast Guard Training Center, Yorktown conducting American Culture training to a group of international maritime officers from 20

countries. Suddenly, my laptop made a few *chucking* noises and -- *POOF!* -- the “blue screen of death” appeared on the stage behind me.

As I continued, I tried to subtly regain my slides – no way. Then, after an awkward few moments the Rwanda naval officer spoke up:

“Hit, Control and Delete to bounce you out”

“No,” came to response from Chile, “Control, Alt, Delete will restart it.”

But it didn’t. Only cold blue silence came from the computer.

India was next:

“Get to a Command Prompt, type in c:\\zztop and it will reset to factory specs.”

It continued like this for another minute or two with inputs from “across the world.” Yet, my laptop *still* resembled a flat rock. Then from Thailand:

“Remove your battery, then power cord. Next, plug in your power cord and it will restart in Scandisk or Safe Mode.”

The group thought a moment then loudly agreed and, it worked.

As the laptop returned to life, I asked them, “Do you realize what we just witnessed?”

The group shook their heads.

I answered excitedly, “We all speak Microsoft! And we speak it to the *trouble shooting* level – and in your case,” I gestured to them, “all in a foreign language.”

And, I said to myself, they see this as *normal*.

Whoa.

It doesn’t matter where you look; Ft. Bliss, National Defense University, Ft. Bragg, Pensacola NAS, Ft. Eustis, RTC Yorktown -- even the Arizona Air National Guard, the IMSOs are the real stars of the DOD international world and break down generations-old stereotypes of Americans daily by showcasing the American culture to thousands of internationals across their careers. Their selfless actions and personal engagement to the well being of their internationals is one of the great stories in today’s military. I am proud and *delighted* to be a small part of it all.

To see more of Dr. C’s articles, go to www.drculture.com or www.interlinkconsulting.com. If you have any cross cultural training needs or are interested in Dr. C’s training programs for your organization or company, just call 561-792-0453 or email thepros@interlinkconsulting.com.