

Foreign culture courses now career requirement

By [Gina Harkins](#) - Staff writer

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MARINE CORPS BASE QUANTICO, Va. — The Corps' newest crop of sergeants will be the first enlisted Marines required to meet new education requirements before they are eligible for promotion to staff sergeant and beyond.

The program is called Regional, Culture and Language Familiarization, or RCLF for short. It takes the globe, carves it into 17 sections, and assigns to Marines the cultures and languages associated with each.

Moving forward, every newly promoted sergeant — pay attention, corporals and lance corporals — will be matched to one of these regions and required to develop nuanced expertise in its culture and main language, and to meet new professional military education milestones throughout the remainder of their careers. In other words, to be eligible for staff sergeant, gunny, master sergeant and so on, Marines will have to complete rank-specific distance-learning courses and pass corresponding tests.

This is mandatory starting with all sergeants who pinned on their rank Oct. 1. A Marine administrative message, to be released in the coming weeks from Marine Corps University, will outline the program's requirements, officials said.

By tying these new PME requirements to Marines' promotion, the Corps can ensure it has a culturally competent force for the future, said Maj. Thomas Ross, the RCLF program officer. With the Corps' shift from a decade of land warfare back to its expeditionary roots, the hope is that no matter where in the world Marines are called, they'll have officers and enlisted personnel on hand who can teach their comrades about what to expect — and what to avoid — when they put boots on foreign soil.

Today's environment isn't as predictable as it was in the past, said George Dallas, a retired colonel who serves as director of the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, which developed the RCLF program.

“We don't know where things are going to come from — good or bad — and we don't necessarily know how to leverage those things to our advantage,” he said. “This will allow us to do that ... The familiarization with the culture, the language and the region are all combat multipliers.”

Moreover, this initiative will give Marines the right skills at the right points in their careers and increase the level of responsibility that comes with a promotion, said Maj. Gen. Tom Murray, the commanding general of Training and Education Command. It will create accountability, he said, and ensure that Marines will learn what the Corps needs them to learn.

As of Oct. 12, no enlisted promotion policies had changed, said Maj. Shawn Haney, a spokeswoman for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. The PME requirement for promotion to staff sergeant will remain the Sergeant Distance Education Program until a promotion policy change is formally staffed and in effect, she said.

That should happen before the MARADMIN is released.

How it will work

The RCLF program for enlisted Marines mirrors one that's been in place since 2008 for all new lieutenants attending The Basic School, and since 2010 for all new warrant officers.

Sergeants will likely be assigned their regions, cultures and languages about a month after the MARADMIN drops, Ross said. And they'll have their entire tenure at that rank to complete between 12 and 16 hours of distance learning on their new assigned part of the world.

Marines also will have 80 hours of language instruction to complete during the ranks of sergeant and staff sergeant, which they must finish to be considered PME-complete and eligible to make gunnery sergeant. (On the officer side, those 80 hours of language instruction must be completed by the time they're in zone for major or chief warrant officer four.) Course requirements for enlisted Marines will look like this:

Private and private first class: 1 hour, includes existing cultural instruction at boot camp.

Lance corporal and corporal: 2½ hours, includes existing cultural instruction through the Corporals Course.

Sergeant: 12 to 16 hours, includes an introduction to regional operational culture and the start of 80 hours in language instruction.

Staff sergeant: 12 to 16 hours, includes application of operational culture principles in the tactical environment and completion of the remaining language instruction.

Gunnery sergeant: 12 to 16 hours, includes analysis and support of decision making using operational culture principles.

Master sergeant, first sergeant, master gunnery sergeant: 12 to 16 hours, includes strategic evaluation and decision-making using operational culture principles.

That's 131½ hours, minimum, from recruit to master gunnery sergeant. The lessons will be available on Marinenet, so they'll be accessible all over the world.

Ross said one-on-one training for every Marine would be ideal. But with this applying to about 80,000 Marines once the program is in full swing, that's just not doable, he said.

Sergeants will take the same course that lieutenants and new warrant officers take, and the officer to enlisted education will mirror itself all the way up the ranks. The endpoint will be that master gunnery sergeants, lieutenant colonels and chief warrant officer fives have all completed the same blocks of instruction.

New officers are allowed to rank the regions they'd like to study. That won't be the case for enlisted Marines. The comparatively high number of sergeants would not make that feasible, Ross said.

That means some Marines will learn Spanish, while others get more complicated languages like Mandarin Chinese or Pashto.

"It's just one of those things," Dallas said. "Life's not fair. Some people go to Tahiti and some go to Adak, Alaska."

Like the rest of the Marine Corps, RCLF will be weighted a bit more heavily in the Asia-Pacific region, Murray said, but the overall goal is balance. The challenge in providing cultural training, he said, is that the Corps does not know exactly where the next threat is. The RCLF program helps establish a good distribution of proficiency across the force.

Marines currently above the rank of sergeant, or sergeants who've been in that rank for some time, do not have to meet RCLF requirements, Ross said. But the content will be open to any Marine, and everyone is encouraged to go through it.

"The incentive that any Marine has is professionalism," he said. "The desire to know his trade is going to be the biggest incentive. Just like when I go hit the [physical fitness test], I don't want the younger Marines beating me on the pull-ups and sit-ups, so that's incentive for me to run faster."

Why it's needed

Cultural awareness is not a new concept for Marines. Recruits learn about diversity in boot camp. Junior Marines build on those concepts in the Corporals Course. Marines on their way to Iraq or Afghanistan ran into culture-specific role players at Enhanced Mojave Viper pre-deployment training. Others are briefed with country-specific lessons before they deploy to places like Eastern Europe or Africa.

But now, career-minded Marines will get more specific training, Dallas said. This is particularly important, he said, as decision-making becomes more decentralized.

"We see decisions being pushed down, where battalions are making more of the strategic decisions and where companies are occupying their own areas of the operation," Dallas said. "So the enlisted Marine has a very key role in the leadership and decision-making at those levels."

The goal of the program — which is expected to be developed over the next two years — is not to make Marines fluent in foreign languages or to make them into regional-area experts, Dallas

said. Rather, the aim is to teach them to be more effective in a part of the world in which they might be called to work someday.

Members of a Marine expeditionary unit might be called for disaster-relief assistance in Haiti, for example, before being directed to Africa. RCLF, Ross said, will ensure that Marines on those ships can teach each other about the things they might see while in-country.

“It’s not to replace the intelligence briefs or the intelligence officers,” Ross said. “But the beauty of the program is that — once we get this thing grown out — we’ll have a cadre, specifically in the operating forces, that will have some familiarization so they can turn and give the hip-pocket class to their counterparts.”

The cultural training Marines will receive as part of RCLF is meant to teach them about people and cultural customs. The language portion will teach basic social graces and tactical phrases that can help in a military setting, since Marines work with a lot of foreign forces.

“I think what’s happened,” Ross said, “is that Marines have been so sensitized to the importance of culture in Afghanistan or Iraq that when they go to other places, they automatically put it in their training schedule.”

The RCLF program is supported by the commandant’s planning guidance, which Gen. Jim Amos published upon becoming the Corps’ top officer in 2010, particularly as it relates to enhancing education. When he addressed the House Armed Services Committee in February, Amos said that expanding cultural programs would be vital to the service’s future.

Amos’ planning guidance also laid out plans for boosting the number of foreign area officers and regional area officers, programs that will continue, Dallas said, along with other more specialized programs for linguists.

The objective of RCLF is to imbue Marines with language familiarity, he said. It’s not designed to make everyone fluent.

“You’re not going to negotiate a treaty and you’re not going to do anything too fancy,” Dallas said. “But you might not alienate a village or a farmer or somebody like that — which, of course, will pay us dividends.”