

# “News from the Field”

## Missed Opportunities to Build Goodwill

### We Should Use Strategic Gift-Giving to Build Our Partnerships

BY LIEUTENANT JOSHUA AISEN, U.S NAVY

**“You’re joking, right?” The European Command (EUCOM) resources officer, with a half-smirk, asked as though he wasn’t sure whether he was in on the gag.**

It was a fair question. On that day in October 2012, we were getting close to the budget calamity known as “sequestration,” and every expenditure was subject to a high (and rising) degree of scrutiny. I had just arrived in Stuttgart, Germany, for the EUCOM’s annual Regional Working Group. I had traveled there from the NATO Maritime Interdiction Operations Training Center (NMIOTC) in Souda Bay, Crete, where I, alongside the NMIOTC team, had put the finishing touches on a 7-nation tactical interdiction event scheduled to take place that December.

Part of our planning was counting the costs associated with the event and identifying the funding sources available to meet these costs. We had jumped through the necessary hoops and rigorously justified hundreds of thousands of dollars of expenses in travel, lodging, food, and training materials. We had a hard time, though, finding the right funding source for our last expense category: gifts. We had planned for each participant to leave with assorted mementos of the event – a t-shirt, a ball cap, a pen, and a satchel, all at a total cost of about 30 Euros per person. As the leading organizer of the event, I also wanted to present gifts to each country’s delegation and to our hosts, the Greek Navy.

But when I asked the EUCOM resource officer which funding stream to use for gifts, he thought I was joking and, when he understood that I wasn’t, literally laughed in my face: “We don’t have money to waste on those kinds of things! You should know better than that!” He was partially right: I understood that there was funding set aside for gifts and mementos under the Official Representation Funds (ORF). But ORF only applies to high-ranking officials (O-6 or above, in most cases), which left it unavailable for my working-level event. Maybe he meant that I should have recognized the futility of asking for money for gifts in that budgetary environment. Or maybe he thought I should have joined with much of the federal government in pretending that the “optics” of gifts as “wasteful” are more important than their actual potential effect.

But he – and all of us – are wrong if we consider money spent on gifts to be a waste.

When we engage in multi-lateral exercises, training, or conferences, the actual increase in cooperative operational proficiency is usually a very small portion of the benefit to the United States. This is especially true when we work with partners on an irregular or ad hoc basis with a low likelihood that the people participating in the training will be the same personnel in any future combined operations. We conduct these events, however, because of the very large potential benefits of positively influencing individuals: people who are or will be leaders in their organizations. To create these positive impressions and capture the associated benefits to U.S. interests, gifts should not be an afterthought, but a focal point in our planning process.

A large part of the reasoning behind this is simply intuitive: although the NMIOTC event I planned was made possible by U.S. funding, I still felt deeply embarrassed when, at the close of the week, sailors from every country presented gifts to us and each other. Other, individual gifts had been presented earlier in the week. When the United States, with a per capita GDP between four and fifteen times higher than those of our counterparts, is the sole participant that refuses to fund gifts at a major international event, it reflects neither power nor generosity – both key attributes of valued allies.

We should reconsider carefully our choice to create such negative personal impressions. Dr. Julia Minson, a behavioral psychologist and assistant professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, points out that in many cultures it is unbelievable that one would come to a meeting or major event without a display of generosity or hospitality. By not specifically planning for gifts, we run the risk of giving away any gains that we hope to achieve by staging the event in the first place.

Furthermore, while we spend large sums of money to conduct international exercises with the goal of improving the capability of allied forces to act in concert with us, we can also use gifts (at a comparatively much lower cost) to increase their willingness to work with us. Dr. Minson points out there is a large body of research that suggests strongly that gift-giving leads to reciprocity, either in terms of gifts or collaborative actions. While ORF is targeted at high-ranking officials, creating goodwill among the rank-and-file is also a worthwhile pursuit. It

is plain that if the majority of military personnel in a country are favorably disposed to the U.S., it creates an environment where it is more difficult for their leadership to be uncooperative or hostile to U.S. interests.

How do we create that environment? We start with mugs on desktops or a pen offered to a colleague – conversation starters and tangible reminders of cooperation and camaraderie.

A main objective of international training events is to provide a hopeful glimpse of a possible future scenario in which we are working side-by-side with our allied forces. We not only want our partners to work with us, though. We want them to strive to be us! This is bedrock principle in U.S. foreign relations: The whole world will be better off if everyone lives under a democratic government, works within a market-based economic system, and has their military governed by civilians and the rule of law. In every interaction, then, with our partner nations, we show them an example of how we want them to shape their future. Our partners are no strangers to tight budget environments and complicated bureaucratic requirements, but we defeat ourselves if the vision of the future offered by the mighty U.S. Navy is one where restrictions on funding are so onerous that even basic cultural niceties cannot be observed.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Joshua Aisen is a Navy Foreign Area Officer specializing in the EUCOM AOR. His past assignments include desk officer for Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia at Naval Forces Europe in Naples, Italy. While at NAVEUR, he also directed the Eurasia Partnership Program. He has a BA in International Relations from Brigham Young University and will finish a Master in Public Administration from Harvard University in May 2016.

# The FAO Association at Monterey

BY COLONEL MARK CHAKWIN, U.S. ARMY - RETIRED

FAOA Monterey concluded 2015 and started the New Year with several milestones. In December, the FAOA writing award for Excellence in International Affairs was presented by the Association to Captain Seth Neville, U.S. Air Force, at the Winter 2015 annual awards ceremony presided over by the Naval Postgraduate School President, Vice Admiral Ronald A. Route, USN, (Retired).

In both January and June the semi-annual Joint Foreign Area Officer Courses (JFAOC) were conducted at the Presidio of Monterey. Each presented excellent opportunities for a “FAOs on Tap” happy



JFAOC STUDENTS ATTENDING FAO ASSOCIATION CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST