

Legal Lessons in Interoperability

My Time at Inter-American Squadron Officer School

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Every captain in the United States Air Force (USAF) is expected to attend Squadron Officer School (SOS), a Professional Military Education (PME) course taught at Maxwell Air Force Base (MAFB). This course lasts six weeks and focuses on developing leaders through collaborative team-building exercises. As a young trial counsel, I worked a court-martial with another attorney who had information about an alternative version of SOS that grabbed my interest. I learned that Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, hosted the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA).

IAAFA holds three SOS variants a year. Inter-American Squadron Officer School (ISOS) maintains the same curriculum taught at SOS at MAFB, but with a few twists. The course is carried out entirely in Spanish, and two-thirds of the class is selected from Latin American Air Forces. In another difference from SOS, where all USAF captains are expected to attend as a *requirement* for promotion to major, the captains from Latin America are *selected* to attend this course as a reward for superior performance. The USAF captains are also competitively selected to attend. This competitive environment is how IAAFA carries out its vision to “Strengthen partnerships that advance shared interests and enable partner nations to act in support of aligned strategic objectives.”¹

As soon as I heard about this course, I decided to apply. I had learned Spanish as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, majored in Latin American Studies in college, and taken classes at a university in Mexico, so I was confident that my Spanish would be up to the task. Spanish wasn't the only requirement I would have to fulfill. I was shocked at how much had to go into the application package. I needed to take the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT), score as high as possible, write a letter of interest, get a letter of recommendation from my senior rater (wing commander, in my case), and put all those together, along with my scores from the USAF Fitness Test.² I scored well on the DLPT, wrote and rewrote my letter, received a strong recommendation from my senior rater, and submitted my package. A few weeks later, I found that I was part of the 10 percent of applicants who were selected to attend the course! I was ecstatic and packed my bags for the two weeks of mandatory quarantine.

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lessons to my career as an USAF Judge Advocate (JAG). Even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, ISOS created lasting bonds of friendship, and allowed me to grow as an officer from the experiences of my peers.

Challenges

There were many challenges inherent to the task of molding military officers from different countries into cohesive teams, starting with COVID-19. ISOS, just like everything else in 2020, was in the middle of adapting to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In order to achieve its mission to “[p]rovide military education and training to military personnel of the Americas and other eligible partner nations,”³ certain adaptations had to be made.

A key lesson learned from ISOS was the importance of flexibility to success. COVID-19 has strained all aspects of society, and military training is no different. Preventing COVID transmittal was crucial to both preserving good relationships between the various services, and allowing ISOS to continue in-person, as opposed to virtually. While the class didn’t officially start until the end of our quarantine, the cadre of instructors got us started with several virtual icebreakers, introductions to IAAFA’s Classroom of the Future (using virtual tools like Google Classroom),⁴ and other logistical matters so that we could hit the ground running with minimal disruptions.

Other courses, like SOS at MAFB, were quickly moved to an entirely virtual experience, with great success. However, ISOS required a different course. First and foremost, the leadership team at IAAFA realized that the ISOS experience was not something that was easily transferrable to a virtual classroom. The ISOS motto states, “*Reglas claras, amistades duraderas*,” which translates as “Clear expectations, lasting friendships.” Lasting friendships with international military officers simply can’t be forged over Zoom and Microsoft Teams. In that spirit, the team at IAAFA found workarounds to help the class be a success in the midst of a pandemic.

As previously mentioned, everyone was ordered to quarantine for two weeks before the class started and the adaptations continued when class started.⁵ These adaptations ranged from standard mask wearing to more creative innovations, like Google Classroom and virtual reality interviews. By incorporating these adaptations, the ISOS experience proved that essential military activities can evolve and change to best function during a global pandemic. One of the most interesting learning tools employed was a virtual interview with a computer-generated avatar, voiced by professional actors based in California.

During this exercise, the avatar changed form to represent different scenarios we experience as military officers. This interview simulated minor disciplinary

actions, sexual assault reporting scenarios, and labor law issues. Watching officers from different countries bring their unique perspectives to these scenarios provided interesting insights into how different nation's militaries handle these all-too common issues. For example, when an officer from the Dominican Republic had to correct a small disciplinary issue (a subordinate showing up to work late), he called the member to attention and for the next five minutes lectured him about the importance of showing up on time, and ended the session by illustrating the rank disparity between him and his subordinate, emphasizing the importance of obeying superior officers. This was startling for most of the USAF officers, as something like this would usually be handled in an informal, low-key way. Seeing how this was handled by a different service helped us see that sometimes a stricter initial approach to discipline could prevent a one-time issue from turning into something bigger. This exercise was also a great adaptation to the demands placed on IAAFA by COVID-19. Transmission risk was virtually nil, as we were all masked, had undergone quarantine, were socially distanced, and the actor voicing the avatar was in California.

Another challenge beyond the issues presented by the COVID-19 pandemic was integrating all the teammates into a cohesive unit. As previously mentioned, everyone who attended ISOS was competitively selected. The USAF students included US Space Force (USSF) officers, who were the first ever USSF PME graduates), judge advocates, engineers, intelligence officers, and aircrew. The international officers were similar—these officers, from the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Honduras, represented the best that their countries had to offer. They included the presidential helicopter pilot from Honduras, the pilot for Ecuador's version of Air Force One, the top fighter pilot from the Dominican Republic, a maintenance officer from the Honduran Air Force, and a member of the Guatemalan Armed Forces soccer team. The international students took the course very seriously. Many of them had signed active-duty service commitments ranging from six months to three years in exchange for attending the course. These officers brought a vast amount of experience from their countries battles against drug trafficking that was a great complement to the officers from the USAF and USSF Forces.

These officers knew that coming and learning from the world's preeminent Air Force would teach them things they couldn't learn anywhere else, and they came prepared and ready to learn every day. This gathering of type-A, high achieving individuals naturally led to competition. In a twist from regular SOS, every single person at the course had to be selected to be there from among their peers. Every student was used to being the best, most successful, and most influential officer in their unit. Whether in hours-long soccer games or battling to complete team-

building exercises, one of the biggest challenges we faced as students was how to work together to achieve our goals. There were so many students used to directing and leading, that when it came time to listen, students had a hard time giving up control.

The personality struggles culminated during a session of Project X. Project X is a team-building exercise carried out at SOS and other USAF leadership courses. It usually involves some type of obstacle course, materials to collect and use appropriately, and penalties for breaking the rules of the objective. In this case, two fighter pilots found themselves stranded at the end of a bridge that they were simultaneously constructing and crossing. Time was running out, and the bridge was starting to fall apart. Instead of working together to solve the problem, they argued until time ran out. Afterwards, they had a debriefing where they were able to clear the air and move forward, but their shared competitiveness worked against them to the detriment of the team.

The issues with communication didn't stop there. Just because all students attending spoke Spanish didn't mean we all understood each other all the time—for example, the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico greatly differs from the Spanish spoken in Ecuador, and vice versa.⁶ These communication issues even extended to the cadre. While the class heavily focused on strengthening relationships within Spanish-speaking countries, a large part of the faculty came from Brazil, where Portuguese is the native language—thus presenting an issue from the very beginning. However, the instructors didn't let this stop them: they spoke a heavily accented version of Spanish called "*Portuñol*" and did their best to communicate with the other students.⁷ These instructors wanted to learn Spanish so badly that they bribed students with candy to catch and correct any errors they made. It wasn't perfect, but by and large, everyone understood each other, and the instructors dramatically improved their Spanish by the time the course was over.

While I focused on communicating with my classmates, we were also learning about how to communicate between countries and services. An interesting topic that emerged in this course was the different conflicts each allied country focused on. As officers in the United States military, senior leaders preach to us the importance of preparation for "great power conflict." Conflict with Russia and/or China dominates thoughts and planning. A general even came to our class and talked to us about how great power conflict is the most pressing issue of our time.

However, just south of our border, China and Russia are out of sight, and nearly out of mind. My classmates were worried about primarily one issue: drug trafficking. While the general discussed the dangers of Chinese expansion, my classmates told a different story. My Honduran pilot friend told a story about how he was flying over a drug convoy in his country, only to have a bullet pass through his

canopy. That bullet wasn't fired by a Russian soldier, but rather by a Honduran drug runner. The other pilots had similar stories about the violence in their countries. They had very little energy to spare on thoughts of combatting Russian/Chinese aggression. The general's words weren't relevant to their countries' needs.

Lessons Learned

All of these struggles at ISOS carried valuable lessons for judge advocates. First and foremost is the importance of effective communication as attorneys and advocates. Communication between attorneys, between attorneys and the military judge, attorneys to victims, attorneys to commanders, and any other parties drives the entirety of the practice of law. It's important to be able to understand our objective, and the objective of the other parties. The general who spoke to my ISOS class was unable to effectively communicate with my classmates, because what he was teaching did not matter to them.

Firstly, the old adage that "flexibility is the key to airpower" rings true to both ISOS and our work as JAGs. Adaptation is crucial as we adapt to a post COVID-19 world. We had to change many of our ISOS experiences to keep everyone healthy. While these adaptations were irritating at times, they helped us graduate the course with no infections or COVID issues. This idea of adaptation can be applied as well to how we carry out our mission as attorneys and officers. Some things, like staff meetings, commander's calls, and other tasks are well-suited to Zoom or Skype. However, other responsibilities are just too essential to be done virtually or cancelled or postponed until after the pandemic. We can still mitigate risk, but some things must be done in-person. Whether respecting an accused's right to speedy trial, helping a client through a contentious divorce, or an important face-to-face with a commander or mission partner, there is a balance to be struck between COVID-19 mitigation practices and fulfilling our duties as legal advisors.

Communication can take many different forms. Not only do we need to be competent in communicating our interests with any and all parties involved in our work, but we also have to be able to speak their "language." The Brazilian instructors at ISOS struggled to obtain fluency in Spanish in order to effectively communicate with us. As JAG's, we may be "fluent" in military justice, but then be assigned to a civil law position. A JAG may be proficient in operations law, but then might have to cover a labor law position due to staffing issues. While each individual may be less fluent in their role than they would prefer, fluency can be obtained through hard work and effort. Being able to communicate about the issues at hand in a way that our clients will understand is a crucial part of being a good attorney and officer.

Just as we experienced personality struggles as we sought to integrate our teams at ISOS, this can be an issue for us JAG officers as well. Seeing the conflict between my classmates reminded me of many staff meetings or trial strategy sessions I've had in my time in the JAG Corps. As attorneys and litigators, many of us are type-A competitors, with strong ideas about the best way forward. In the day-to-day hustle, it can be difficult to get on the same page with co-workers and opposing counsel. However, shelving egos and communicating effectively are critical to winning cases and succeeding in our mission.

Finally, our messaging and points of emphasis need to ring true to our allies. What's important to us isn't necessarily going to be important to them, so we need to be able to find points in common, and must effectively communicate what our goals are, and how achieving them will help our allies as well. This applies at the top strategic levels of the military, as well as to the tactical levels where we work.

For example, as a prosecutor, my interests have often come into conflict with the interests of a victim and their Special Victim's Counsel (SVC). I had the opportunity to try the Air Force's first-ever "revenge porn" case (Article 117a, Unlawful Transmission of Intimate Images).⁸ The case file yielded powerful images that I wanted to use in trial. However, the victim was embarrassed and ashamed that her private videos had been distributed without her consent and was understandably reluctant to have them shown in court. Thankfully, she and her SVC were both supportive of moving forward in trial, provided I found a way to minimize exposure to her client. We were able to secure a plea deal and used the stipulation of fact to admit her sensitive images, thus totally eliminating exposure to anybody beyond the military judge. Additionally, we won the conviction, a punitive discharge, and a strong jail sentence. Finding a way to join our interests with those of the victim were a crucial element of our success at trial.

Seeing the visiting general's failure to impact the foreign military officers only reinforced the importance of this concept. We have different goals than our allies do. However, we need to be able to effectively communicate why our goals matter to them, whether that's in a court-martial setting or working with allied nations. If we can do so, they will be more able to help us achieve our objective.

Conclusion

This course undoubtedly met its goal of educating leaders and creating lasting bonds between officers. After overcoming initial personality conflicts, socially distanced barbecues were a regular occurrence, with each country showing off their best dishes and meals—by the end of the course, Dominican students invited the rest of the students to an ISOS reunion in the Dominican Republic post-pandemic. The USAF students created valuable inter-service connections

with USSF officers. All attendees got to learn more about what other career fields were doing and battlefields important to our allies.

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Notes

1. <https://www.37trw.af.mil/Units/Inter-American-Air-Forces-Academy/>.
2. See also <https://www.37trw.af.mil/Portals/57/Documents/IAAFA/Attend%20a%20PME%20course.pdf>.
3. <https://www.37trw.af.mil/Units/Inter-American-Air-Forces-Academy/>
4. <https://www.aetc.af.mil/News/Article/2010524/iaafas-classroom-of-the-future-explained-on-developing-mach-21-airmen-podcast/>.
5. Vanessa R. Adame, *Despite COVID, IAAFA Continues Its Mission Uninterrupted*, <https://www.37trw.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2554488/despite-covid-iaafa-continues-its-mission-uninterrupted/>.
6. <https://ehlion.com/magazine/spanish-dialects/>.
7. <http://www.lingref.com/cpp/hls/8/paper1251.pdf>.
8. https://www.army.mil/article/200539/updates_to_ucmj_criminalize_unauthorized_distribution_of_sexual_imagery.



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Capt Jeremy S. Driggs currently serves as the Chief of Adverse Actions for the 502d Installation Support Group, Joint Base San Antonio – Lackland, Texas. In this capacity he is responsible for providing legal services to the 37th Training Wing, the 59th Medical Wing, the Special Warfare Training Wing, as well as a broad spectrum of subordinate units and partner commands. Capt Driggs received a direct commission and entered active-duty as an Air Force Judge Advocate in March 2018. He attended the J. Reuben Clark School of Law where he worked as a law clerk for Dredge Law, PC focusing on worker’s compensation cases, as an immigration law clerk for Wilner & O’Reilly APLC, and as a law clerk for the Utah County Public Defenders Association. He is admitted to practice law in the state of Texas.