

# Strengthening Interoperability through the Language Enabled Airman Program

Perspectives from the 2018 to 2019 US–Philippine ISR-MTT Mission

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## Abstract

Interoperability is a priority for operational concepts, modular force elements, communications, information sharing, and equipment. It is also a key element for strengthening alliances and partnerships under the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*. The Air Force Language Enabled Airmen Program (LEAP) is a valuable tool for deepening interoperability but may be currently underutilized in some regional and cultural settings due to the scarcity of program participants. This article will illustrate the importance of building up such a pool of LEAP-trained workforce talent from the perspective of an Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance mobile training team (ISR-MTT) deployed by the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) to drive Philippine military independence on producing actionable intelligence from organic capabilities. It will describe the recruitment and training process; highlight key milestones that were achieved to elevate the ISR-MTT's efforts as a benchmark for training other regional partners; address operational gaps; and provide recommendations to diversify the reach and potential of LEAP in support of the expansion of Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships.

## Introduction

US forces today are operating in a rapidly changing global strategic environment where their military advantage no longer goes unchallenged as in the years immediately following the post–Cold War era. In response to this “new normal,” the United States is actively cultivating its alliances and partnerships—particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. According to the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, “Our allies and partners provide complementary capabilities and forces along with unique perspectives, regional relationships, and information that improve our understanding of the environment and expand our options.”<sup>1</sup> Maximizing interoperability along these lines is difficult when the United States finds itself in an asymmetrical position where it provides the bulk of military training and capabilities to its partners but underutilizes the latter's resources in a mutually ben-

official manner, and when there is a scarcity of technically skilled, language- and culturally-enabled US war fighters who can effectively engage with allies on an operational level and carry out joint missions seamlessly.

This article will illustrate the above issues at work in the context of a US–Philippine intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) training mission that involved heavy reliance on US resources for technology, education, and translation services. Subsequent sections of this article will provide a background of current US–Philippine relations and outline the major objectives of the training mission; describe my recruitment from the LEAP pool; provide an overview of the Philippine unmanned aerial systems (UAS) training program; identify operational gaps and opportunities; and recommend strategies to improve the reach and impact of similar training programs, which include: 1) bridging language and education gaps with the assistance of local agencies and the provision of bilingual documentation; and 2) increasing recruitment and participation in existing language-training programs such as the Air Force Language Enabled Airmen Program (LEAP) to generate a larger, more diversified pool of suitable and mission-ready candidates for training and special operations.

## **Background**

The Philippines is considered a major non-NATO ally. Its partnership with the United States is fostered by strong historical and cultural linkages as well as a joint commitment to democracy and human rights.<sup>2</sup> The two countries reaffirmed shared obligations under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty by signing the Manila Declaration in 2011. The signing came with the expectation “to maintain a robust, balanced, and responsive security partnership including cooperating to enhance the defense, interdiction, and apprehension capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).”<sup>3</sup>

In accordance with the Manila Declaration and the principles outlined in the 2018 US *National Defense Strategy*,<sup>4</sup> allied units partnered within the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) deployed an Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Mobile Training Team (ISR-MTT) to conduct a comprehensive training program with the following objectives: 1) enable the AFP to utilize the *ScanEagle* UAS<sup>5</sup> that were acquired by the Philippine Department of National Defense in 2018<sup>6</sup> to its full potential in various mission settings (e.g., counterterrorism, territorial defense, humanitarian and disaster relief operations); and 2) gain AFP autonomy in UAS operations as demonstrated by focused mission planning, integration, and interoperability. It became apparent to the USSOCOM that a Tagalog (a major dialect that serves as the foundation of the mainstream

Filipino language) speaker was needed on board to support the ISR-MTT efforts. The LEAP became the primary resource for the latter.

### **Recruitment via LEAP**

The *Language Enabled Airman Development Resource* (LEADeR) is a website that maintains a directory of all Airmen and Guardians who are enrolled in LEAP. It was used to help USSOCOM identify this author as a potential candidate for the ISR-MTT. In 2018, I was the only Tagalog-speaking imagery analyst (1N1X1A). The ISR-MTT program owners initially contacted me via e-mail to explore my interest in participating in a Philippine-based mission, followed by an in-person interview to verify technical and instructional skills, language proficiency, and prior special operations experience. Once it was determined that I was a good fit for the ISR-MTT team, I made several predeparture preparations over the course of a month, which included securing buy-in and support from my command's leadership, brushing up on drone capabilities and Tagalog fluency, and conducting background research on the local area of operations, military organizational structure and customs, and current security issues.

### **The Philippine UAS Training Program Overview**

The previously stated twofold objectives of the ISR-MTT were accomplished over a two-year period in different provinces across the Philippines. The training program itself was designed to “train-the-trainer”: after an initial cohort (comprised of active-duty AFP personnel from various service branches) completed all learning modules, it was expected that the graduates had gained sufficient mastery and proficiency in UAS operations to teach their peers in an on-the-job setting. At least three different cohorts were brought in, with some overlaps of the same AFP personnel participating as peer instructors in subsequent training sessions.

Table 1 organizes the various activities that took place over the course of the training program into three broad phases. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss each phase in detail. However, in the next section I will provide some insights gleaned from the implementation and evaluation phases as they relate to language and cultural competencies.

**Table 1. Phased training approach.** (Simplified table adapted for purposes of this article. 22 February 2021.)

Phase	Activities
<b>Planning</b>	<p><b>Coordination:</b> Establishing timelines, expectations, ownership between US and Philippine stakeholders</p> <p><b>Curriculum Development:</b> Foreign Disclosure Officer–approved modules, lesson plans, unclassified resources</p> <p><b>Logistical Preparations:</b> (e.g., hardware/software requirements, classroom setup, travel and lodging arrangements)</p>
<b>Implementation</b>	<p><b>Classroom Instruction:</b> Introduction of UAS concepts and principles ranging from basic to advanced</p> <p><b>Practical Exercises:</b> Hands-on opportunities to engage in UAS mission scenarios as observers, operators, or customers</p>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<p><b>Feedback:</b> Critique of job performance and output (products) by instructors and peers; integration of student input / needs in subsequent training sessions</p> <p><b>After-Action Reports:</b> Submission of progress reports and recommendations to program owners via diplomatic and military channels</p> <p><b>Interoperability Assessment:</b> Instructors assume an exclusively observer role to gauge student proficiency and product quality vis-à-vis US-led UAS mission standards</p>

## Operational Gaps and Opportunities from a Language and Culture Perspective

The Philippines ranks 27th globally in the English Proficiency Index (EPI) and holds one of the highest EPI in Asia (second only to Singapore).<sup>7</sup> Thus, minimal language barriers were encountered during the implementation and evaluation phases. English was the primary medium of instruction. The cohorts were largely bilingual; however, a few communication gaps still occurred as artifacts of the following:

- Some technical terms do not have direct translations/functional equivalents in the vernacular. Tagalog was often used to clarify highly technical concepts. When certain terms (for example, *sensor* and *line-of-sight*) cannot be translated directly, the English word is used as the default and its corollary explanation is comprised of Tagalog and English (“Taglish”). To further aid understanding, references to commonly used Tagalog words, visuals, and props such as a toy drone were occasionally used (see fig. 1).
- English proficiency levels varied among participants. Most students were able to conduct basic conversational English, but few were able to express themselves well enough to formulate follow-up questions on intermediate--to-advanced technical concepts. They would often whisper among themselves or refer to the most proficient English speaker among them for clarity.

Occasionally, I would step in to articulate the questions in English for the benefit of the instructors and then translate the answers back to Tagalog.



*(Image courtesy the author)*

**Figure 1. References and toy drone**

It must be noted that while I was the only LEAP-trained team member, I could not physically support the ISR-MTT efforts 100 percent of the time due to commitments with my CONUS-based command. Were it not for the fact that I was able to find Tagalog-speaking Airmen (albeit not LEAP-trained) within my professional and personal network to fill in for me during certain training periods, the ISR-MTT would have been forced to carry on without a language translator and facilitator. This issue will be revisited at the conclusion and recommendations

section. From a cultural standpoint, there were opportunities to establish rapport with students and leverage their resourcefulness:

- During breaks or post-duty hours, one accepts the invitation to *tambay* (A slang word meaning “to hang out”; originally derived from the English word, “standby.” The place where one hangs out is called *tambayan*. Such informal occasions to chat in the designated break areas *tambayan* or participate in social events such as the occasional karaoke or a “boodle fight”<sup>8</sup> enables students to feel at ease and to enjoy camaraderie.
- Due to limited resources, students had latitude to bridge technology gaps with free to low-cost software solutions. For instance, mapping software and communication applications helped improve technological capabilities in these areas. The downside of these technologies is that strict adherence to operational security protocols is not always feasible.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Post-evaluation data (not shown) indicate that the ISR-MTT-led training program has been successful in cultivating a pool of certified UAS operators in the Philippines. As of November 2020, the UAS capability has continued to thrive across various branches of the AFP (specifically, the Philippine Air Force and Philippine Navy).<sup>9</sup> Remarks such as *Kaya namin ito* (“We can do this”) and similar positive feedback coming from the trainees themselves provide reassurance that the AFP is well on track to maintaining autonomous UAS operations.

The Philippine UAS training program was to become the benchmark for partners in the Indo-Pacific region who may be interested in establishing their own UAS capabilities.<sup>10</sup> To facilitate day-to-day operations and sustain interoperability in future iterations, I recommend the following:

- Engage local academic, government, and industry partners for educational, linguistic, and technological support. Much of the educational heavy lifting could have been accomplished through the University of the Philippines’ National Institute of Geological Sciences and National Institute of Physics.<sup>11</sup> The university could provide instructors who could teach geospatial and satellite technology principles, respectively, using layman’s terms.<sup>12</sup> The Commission on the Filipino Language (Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino, the official regulating body of the Filipino language) could have provided guidance on translations.<sup>13</sup> Finally, geographic information system providers could have shared access to their data at a reduced cost.



- Provide bilingual documentation. To address English fluency gaps, it would be helpful to develop bilingual documents. These ensure that all operators understand policies and procedures across the board (see fig. 2).

H	I	J	K	L
<b>Mission Date</b> (Petsa ng Misyon)	<b>Take-off Time H</b> (Oras ng pagpaplipad)	<b>Mission Summary</b> (Buod ng Misyon at mga makabuluhang aktibidad)	<b>Land Time H</b> (Oras ng paghabalik)	<b>Team Name</b> (Pangkat on duty)

(image courtesy of the author)

**Figure 2. Excerpt from a bilingual (English/Tagalog) mission tracker.** (Created by author, circa 2019).

Finally, the shortage of LEAP-trained Tagalog speakers should be addressed. I believe the reason behind shortage is that the program is not well-advertised among Tagalog-speaking Airmen and Guardians. The following strategies may provide greater prominence and incentives to join the program:

- Publish LEAP information in official Air Force and Space Force guidance documents such as the Career Field Educational Training Plan (CFETP). Standard verbiage about the program should be disseminated for consistency and ease of inclusion—eliminating the need to consult the LEAP website (see sample CFETP excerpt, fig. 3). This would also increase the likelihood of diversifying the pool of subject matter experts who are LEAP-trained.
- Develop and authorize a uniform patch or tab to indicate that an Airman and Guardian is an active participant in LEAP. Patches and tabs are great conversation starters. While optional, this is a low-cost, high-visibility approach for LEAP to spread through word-of-mouth.
- Streamline the process of obtaining benefits associated with Special Experience Identifiers and Foreign Language Pay Bonus through a centralized hub or automated system. This will eliminate the need to manually fill out various forms and coordinate with multiple approval authorities.

In conclusion, interoperability will be greatly enhanced not only through collaborations with the US partners' local agencies but also with the expansion of LEAP program participation to include more Airmen and Guardians who speak the languages of the Indo-Pacific region. In fact, good command of one or more of these languages may become a primary recruiting tool that will advance the careers of prospective Airmen and Guardians for unique conventional and special

operations assignments. Building up this talent pool to a critical mass will contribute to a more lethal, resilient, and agile force that is prepared to meet US defense objectives and preserve its global influence.

program (GLR) and Leadership and Professional Development (LPD) programs. The ELP facilitates its collaboration through MTT coordination, ELS regional alignment, and military service school integration. Although the ELP primarily organizes training, it is also responsible for some military GEINT tradecraft instruction. For a site near you, please contact the NGC registrar at [NGANGCRegistrar@coe.ic.gov](mailto:NGANGCRegistrar@coe.ic.gov)

### 9.3. Language Training

**9.3.1. Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP).** Leap is designed and managed by the AFCLC. LEAP deliberately develops a core group of language enabled, cross-cultural Airmen across the General Purpose Force (GPF) with working level foreign language proficiency per Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-4001, Air Force Language, Regional Expertise and Culture Program. With these skills, Airmen can better support the application of airpower through strengthening partnerships and interoperability.

9.3.1.1. Participation in LEAP is voluntary and available for Active Duty officer and enlisted Airmen & select Reserve officers. To become a LEAP scholar, Airmen must demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language specified on the Air Force Strategic Language List, receive endorsement from their unit commander, and compete via a board process. Selection to LEAP is based on applicants' existing language proficiency, potential to achieve higher levels of language proficiency, and Air Force language requirements.

9.3.1.2. LEAP develops and sustains Airmen via a two-part system of recurring online training and periodic immersions. Online eMentor courses are a LEAP requirement, and participants are encouraged to complete a course within the first 18 months of selection to the program. The hands-on immersion component - Language Intensive Training Events (LITEs) - is contingent upon participant availability and home station approval.

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9.3.1.3. LEAP scholars may earn the LEAP Special Experience Identifier (SEI) upon meeting eligibility criteria which may qualify them for Foreign Language Proficiency Bonus (FLPB) pay and other language-related opportunities. The LEAP SEI is used by force managers to match Airmen with language dependent assignments, deployments, and TDYs, with roles that include international affairs, security cooperation, mobility advisory, and special operations. Other benefits to LEAP membership include access to social media, networking tools, and mentoring from senior LEAP scholars and Foreign Area Officers (FAO).

### 10. Certification/Credentialing Programs

**10.1. Occupational Instructor Certification.** Upon completion of instructor qualification training, consisting of the instructor methods course and supervised practice teaching, CCAF instructors who possess an associate degree or higher may be nominated by their school commander/commandant for certification as an occupational instructor.

**Figure 3. US Air Force 1N1X1A CFETP–LEAP (verbiage emphasized)<sup>14</sup>**

### **MSgt Timothy, USSF**

As an active-duty service member directly involved in ISR missions, the author's biography is limited to rank and first name only, per regulation.

### **Acknowledgment**

This article is dedicated to my wife and our children.



## Notes

1. James Mattis, *2018 National Defense Strategy Summary* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 8, <https://dod.defense.gov/>.
2. US Department of State, "U.S. Relations with the Philippines," 21 January 2020, <https://www.state.gov/>.
3. US Department of State. "Signing of the Manila Declaration on Board the USS *Fitzgerald* in Manila Bay, Manila, Philippines," 16 November 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/>.
4. Mattis, *2018 National Defense Strategy Summary*, 8–9.
5. See: Insitu – Boeing, "ScanEagle," *Insitu.com*, 2021, <https://www.insitu.com/>.
6. US Embassy in the Philippines, "Philippine Air Force receives drones from US," 13 March 2018, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/>.
7. EF, "Philippines," *EF English Proficiency Index*, 2020, <https://www.ef.edu/>.
8. See: "What is a Boodle Fight," *Ang Sarap*, n.d., <https://www.angsarap.net/>.
9. Xavier Vavaseur, "Philippine Navy Takes Delivery of Eight ScanEagle UAV," *Naval News*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/>.
10. Author's note: Based on official communications and ISR-MTT final debrief with host--nation partners, circa 2019.
11. See: University of the Philippines (U.P.), Diliman, "National Institute of Physics," *U.P. College of Sciences*, 2020, <http://nip.upd.edu.ph/>.
12. See: University of The Philippines, Diliman, "National Institute of Geological Sciences," *U.P. Center of Excellence in Geology*, 2020, <https://nigs.science.upd.edu.ph/>.
13. See: Pamfilo D. Catacata, "The Commission on the Filipino Language," *Republic of the Philippines National Commission for Culture and the Arts*, <https://ncca.gov.ph/>.
14. Inclusion of LEAP in the 1N1 CFETP was made possible by the Air Combat Command Readiness Division (ACC/A23) and Headquarters, Air Force (AF/A2/6) team.