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## CHAPTER FIVE

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# The Company I Kept

## Twenty Years at the Naval Postgraduate School

*by Anna Simons, PhD*

### Introduction

It is hard to know which beginning to lead with, so let me start at the end: I recently retired from 20 years of teaching anthropology at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, California. NPS was the first professional military education (PME) institution in the United States (and, as far as I know, the world) to hire an anthropologist to teach anthropology full-time to military members. Ironically, I spent several years in the early 1990s lobbying the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, to hire an anthropologist, but could never get the academy to pull the trigger. I also tried the same tactic with the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Meanwhile, I had never heard of NPS prior to seeing a small ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1998. The ad was for a position in the Special Operations Academic Group, otherwise known as the Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) curriculum. The group was not even large enough to constitute a department at the time, though we eventually became the Defense Analysis (DA) Department.

The SO/LIC program was not looking for an anthropologist in 1998. Cofounders of the program had no idea someone like me existed. Instead, the ad I responded to had been written with a particular individual in mind, someone who was hired at the same time I was offered a visiting position.

Timing being everything, the ad appeared within months of my earning tenure at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Earning tenure had been politically tricky given the fact that I studied green berets, which is how one of my departmental tenure committee reports described U.S. Army Special Forces, lower case letters and all. Consequently, I was not sure I was ready to throw away what I had worked so hard to earn, especially since UCLA was a top 10, four-field anthropology department, a rarity even in the late 1990s. Was I really ready to give it up for a job at a place no one I knew had ever heard of? No. So I asked my department for a two-year leave of absence, although within the first several months at NPS I knew that I would likely stay.

Hands down, the best part of teaching at UCLA was its undergraduates. My standard line at the time was that while Harvard University—my alma mater—prided itself on diversity, its diversity was manufactured, with the admissions office applying its own predetermined metrics like: we will take one from Wyoming, three from Alabama, six of this color, eight from that background. In contrast, UCLA's diversity was totally organic. Whenever I taught about the Vietnam War, for instance, I could almost always count on having in class some kind of cross section of Vietnam War veterans, sons and daughters of Vietnam War protestors, and students who were Vietnamese- or Laotian-American.

During the course of my six years in Los Angeles, I taught a wide variety of undergraduate and graduate courses. One smart thing UCLA's department did was to *not* allow, never mind make, junior faculty teach the big introduction to anthropology classes. This way we were not overwhelmed at the outset. Nor did we have to try to manage teaching assistants.

Instead, as junior faculty, we taught mostly upper-level electives and graduate seminars, which meant we could introduce new courses into the curriculum. Among those I introduced were two on the anthropology of warfare and conflict. In addition, I taught undergraduate courses about Africa, pastoral nomads, and anthropological methods, and graduate seminars on topics like the social science triumvirate of Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. I also devised a seminar on cross-cultural miscommunication for UCLA's Honors Collegium. In fact, had I stayed at UCLA, I would have been one of the few faculty members to teach two seminars in the collegium. The draw of the collegium was that it attracted smart students who clearly liked to read and think, since they too had to apply for admission to the program. Beyond being selective, these seminars were wonderfully small.

I mention all of this to set the stage for what I encountered at NPS, where we offered an 18-month terminal master of science degree in an interdisciplinary field that existed nowhere else—defense analysis.

But to further set the scene, I also need to briefly sketch several other beginnings.

## **Shaggy Dog Beginnings**

### *The Context beneath the Context*

Beginning number two: I rarely enjoyed school. I escaped high school half a year early and completed college in three years. Graduate school never entered my mind. My ambition was to write and to travel. After relatively short stints on a newspaper, writing speeches for President James “Jimmy” Carter during his last year in office, and trying to do the same for the governor of Arizona, I finally became a vagabond. I spent three and a half years working and traveling abroad. The better part of two of those years was spent trekking north to south and then south to north overland in Africa. This is what eventually got me to graduate school.

Beginning number three: I grew up across the Potomac Riv-

er from Washington, DC, in Alexandria, Virginia, back when “Alexandria” meant nothing to anyone outside of Northern Virginia. Even so, our neighborhood was full of retired and active duty military officers. Friends’ fathers deployed on a fairly regular basis, not that I understood what that meant at the time. Two memories stuck with me. First, the Army Navy Country Club had the biggest, nicest pools in the area, which was important in Washington, DC, during the un-air-conditioned summer. Second, I was always made to wait *outside* of the post exchange (PX) and the commissary on the country club grounds whenever the friend who took me to the pool with her went shopping with her mother. The fact that I was not allowed inside (because I did not have an ID card) made the military seem both gloriously mysterious and alluringly exclusive.

As for my first extensive encounters with soldiers, these took place outside the United States in Israel and then throughout Africa. Often in Africa, this was because soldiers and officers were deployed far from home and talking to two young women—a 20-something American, me, and a 20-something Australian, my travel buddy—offered welcome distraction, though not infrequently we also got stuck at checkpoints and talking to soldiers was our way of ingratiating ourselves so that nothing bad happened to us.

But overall, encounters with military forces provided little more than background noise to what really consumed me by the time I entered graduate school: What accounted for such profound differences between the West and the rest?

Beginning #4: through a series of accidents, I ended up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, once I was back in the United States, where I made an appointment with the then-chair of Harvard’s African studies program. I wanted to ask her where she would recommend that I go for a master’s degree in African studies. My thinking was that maybe *this* would offer me the credentials I needed to publish the screeds about foreign aid that I intended to write. Her response was not what I ex-

pected. She wondered whether I would consider continuing in anthropology for a PhD. I did not tell her that the only reason I had majored in biological anthropology as an undergraduate was because biology required too much work thanks to the many premed students in biology classes. The other thought bubble that I kept to myself had to do with studying and theorizing about people as if they were specimens, which held zero appeal. So, I very politely told her I would think about it.

I went home that night and consulted a family friend, who was a prominent political scientist: What about political science? He told me that no graduate school in any discipline would grant me admission for the fall at such a late date; I would have to wait another year before applying. So, that decided it. Impatient youth that I still was, I defaulted to anthropology.

Beginning #5: thanks to my travels, I knew exactly where I wanted to return for fieldwork—East Africa. More specifically, northern Kenya. Anywhere in the Sahel would have been fine, but we had gotten way off the beaten path in northern Kenya and I knew I liked the desert, I knew camel nomads were understudied, and I thought if I focused on them that would help me expose a lot of misguided development aid.

But like all plans, this one went awry in almost every conceivable way. I did succeed in getting back to northern Kenya during my second summer in graduate school. The aim was to line up my fieldwork site and genuflect to all of the right people for all of the necessary research permissions. By the time I had everything in order and was back in Kenya a year later (1988) to head up to Kenya's remote northern reaches to begin classic live-with-nomads fieldwork, the Executive Office of the President in Nairobi decided to deny permission to anyone seeking to do research in northern Kenya that year. I think there were a grand total of three of us at the time.

Fortunately, the news did not come as a total shock; I had been warned that I might have difficulties and had been advised to have a backup plan before I left the United States.

And so, I had a visa in my passport for Somalia. I had managed to affiliate myself with a World Bank project that concentrated on development in the Central Rangelands. Not only did Somalia boast the world's largest camel herds but more than half of the population was said to be nomadic.

Of course, there were just a few minor challenges associated with switching from Kenya to Somalia—like the language. I had not studied Somali. Also, I had never set foot in Somalia previously. But, longest story short, it also became impossible to live with camel nomads. I arrived in late 1988. By July 1989, the civil war that was tearing up the north spilled south. Unrest confined me to the capital, Mogadishu. Consequently, my research focus had to shift. I was already paying attention to all of the ways in which expatriates perceived, or misperceived, Somalis. I also had a sad but sobering front-row seat for how dissolution was impacting the Somalis I knew.

Beginning #6: there were not many expats in Mogadishu in the late 1980s. Among them were four members of a U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) Mobile Training Team (MTT): three noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and a captain. I spent a lot of time with them; they were my introduction to the U.S. military. The team was in Somalia as part of a multiyear train the trainer effort; by 1988, the Green Berets' chief job was to help oversee the Somali trainers. But, of course, their oversight was not exactly going according to plan either since Somalia was falling apart, which only added to the team's frustrations.

Because I was already paying attention to expat frustrations, it was not long before I tried to explain to my new SF friends *why* Somalis were behaving in ways that did not make sense to them and thereby aggravated them. I figured that maybe I could help allay their frustrations. But, as I quickly discovered, I was way too late; their Somali counterparts had already lied to them so frequently that nothing I said was going to change their minds about the character of the people they were in Somalia to work with.

This then prompted me to write my first letter to a general

officer. In the end, the family friend who first suggested that I write this particular general thought better of forwarding my letter, which was probably just as well. But here is some of what I wrote to the head of U.S. Special Operations Command (no less) in February 1990:

[I]f future teams could be properly armed with the right kind of ethnological information in advance, they might be more likely to find themselves in an inherently frustrating situation without feeling quite so frustrated. I think some of what anthropologists have learned could help SF in Africa, by providing the . . . nuts and bolts of how particular African societies work. Political and military briefings may not be enough. They may not sufficiently prepare a team for an alien culture, no matter how modern or much like ours the host country and its military may seem on the surface. Each country in Africa is unique; even regions within countries can be radically different from one another. Also, Islamic countries in Africa seem to present special problems for Americans, many of whom have deep-seated views (whether admitted or not) about blacks, second only to their feelings about the Muslim religion.

I think an anthropologist could offer SF teams a head start before they ever get to the field. Briefings could serve to warn team members about what they will encounter that they can't expect to understand without first thinking in terms of the dynamics of village-level social organization; what they will encounter that won't make sense, or is "not right" according to American standards, but what can be made sense of using local standards (so that team members at least have a better handle on what

constitutes the local mentality); what they can expect people to want from them, and how subtly or blatantly they should expect to be manipulated; and how they can best handle and/or deflect that manipulation.

A somewhat arrogant letter!

In the letter, though, I also asked General James J. Lindsay whether I could study Special Forces in order to help debunk Green Berets' image as a bunch of Ramboes. *That*, at least, I later got to do.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, fast forward to the 1998 Naval Postgraduate School ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*—the prospect of finally being able to teach Special Operations Forces (SOF) officers seemed too good to be true.

### **From UCLA to NPS**

I took several lessons up the California coast to NPS with me about what seemed to work best with students:

1. Always assign reading that students will want to do—readable, relatable books. And use books rather than articles; they stick with students better. For better or worse, this also means books written by journalists, the best of which are much more accessible and informative than books written by contemporary anthropologists.
2. If tests are required, make them multiple choice and matching. If the point is to test whether students have done the reading and/or attended lectures, then why make them think and synthesize under time pressure. Written test es-

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<sup>1</sup> In the interim, I was also able to go to Fort Drum, NY, to take a stab at soldier-Somali relations for a project sponsored by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, thanks to Dr. David Marlowe, a Harvard-trained anthropologist who had done his fieldwork in Somalia as well.



says are almost always too painful to decipher. Instead, assign thought papers.

3. Thought papers should be no longer than two to three pages, double-spaced. Anything longer than that and students have too much time to bullshit. Anything shorter and they will not put sufficient thought into what they turn in. The most stimulating questions to ask are provocative questions to which there are no correct answers.

I also took all of my course material, obviously. I knew I would have to modify a good bit of it. For instance, at least one-third of the Anthropology of Warfare and Conflict course at UCLA had been devoted to talking about the U.S. military. I also used to invite one of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) instructors to come to class in his green Class A Army uniform so that a retired soldier could then "read" his uniform for the students. Needless to say, this activity was totally unnecessary at NPS.

## The DA Department

The first course I taught at NPS was the Anthropology of Conflict. The following quarter I taught Low-Intensity Conflict: Africa. Most students at the time were senior O3s.<sup>2</sup> Several had worked or traveled in Africa. Almost all of them had deployed somewhere.

Our students hailed from the various Special Operations

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<sup>2</sup> O3 designates a captain in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps and a lieutenant in the Navy. O4s are majors in the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps, and lieutenant commanders in the Navy. One reason people use the shorthand of O3 or O4 is to avoid confusion in mixed Service environments since the title captain refers to an O3 in every Service but the Navy, where a Navy captain is three ranks higher than an Army, Air Force, or Marine Corps captain. See "U.S. Military Rank Insignia," Department of Defense, accessed 12 February 2021.

tribes, which means we had officers from Army Special Forces, civil affairs, psychological operations, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne), and the 75th Ranger Regiment. We also taught Air Force Special Operations pilots and navigators, as well as officers from U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command, most of whom were Navy Sea, Air and Land Forces, or SEALs. We received a sprinkling of regular Air Force pilots and Navy surface warfare officers as well and served as a test bed for the Navy's Seaman to Admiral (STA) program.<sup>3</sup> Because we had five SEALs who were slated to earn their bachelor's and master's degrees during a three-year period, I got to teach them as many undergraduate-level courses as I could invent; in addition, they took the same classes everyone else did. The first of the group recently made it to admiral; he took approximately nine classes with me, so many that we used to joke at the time that he was majoring in anthropology.

We received cohorts of students twice each year and, in 1998, we consisted of four full-time faculty. Because we operated year-round on the quarter system, we each taught all of the students continuously, which made it easy to build on what we knew we had previously conveyed. Classes were small enough to be run like seminars, though the other way in which we were able to work intensively with students came through advising theses.

By the time I retired, I had advised upward of 135 theses as principal advisor, considerably more than anyone else in the department. Because the vast majority of these theses were unclassified and would reside in the public domain forever, I felt it critical to ensure they were as well-argued and well-written as possible. This goal turned out to be a labor of love for four reasons, all four of which shed light on the uniqueness of our program.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the STA program, see "STA-21: Seaman to Admiral Program," Naval Service Training Command, accessed 12 February 2021.

First, unlike a normal graduate program, we had no say over who was admitted to ours. Our job was to teach whomever we were sent. Those sent to us were often command-track, rising stars. But they were not necessarily what some academics would consider to be typical students. Second, graduate school represented a do-over for many of our officers. Most were grateful for a second chance to learn and think in a semistructured setting, and they usually freely admitted that they had not necessarily applied themselves as undergrads. Some, of course, still resisted applying themselves. But, with rare exceptions, even those officers who were most enthusiastic about school seldom retained normal college-level writing skills. Third, everything that was true of our American officers was also true of our international officers. When international officers from Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America began attending the program in 2003 they represented both a gift and a complication. Some countries consistently sent their best and brightest; these individuals added tremendous breadth and depth to discussions. In other cases, individuals came to California thanks to family and political connections, clearly. Among the latter were several who did not merit the degrees they were awarded, at least not scholastically speaking. However, here too, larger equities were at stake, which brings me to the fourth way in which we differed from a normal research university: all of our students came to us after time spent in the real world and all were heading straight back out into an operational environment. We were cognizant of this before 9/11. But after the 11 September attacks, there was no escaping what our students, including our international students, would be doing: they served at the tip of the spear in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).

Given where our students ended up and the gravity of their roles, one might wonder what could be more important than exposing them to concepts that might help them better analyze adversaries, allies, situations, and cross-cultural encounters. Here, too, is where having international officers

in classes proved to be both a gift and a complication—a gift because they helped me shed light on important cross-cultural misconceptions, but a complication because we could not always discuss everything with equal frankness given their understandable sensitivities.

To describe other wrinkles that impacted what and how I taught culture, I should also say something about other changes over time:

1. Our cohort numbers and class sizes grew. This made it impossible to run everything as a seminar. However, I also learned that not all subjects lent themselves to discussion unless I could be sure that everyone had done all of the reading prior to class, which, again, was an impetus to only assign reading I thought students would enjoy. I became good at figuring out what kind of reading this was, but I still ended up occasionally having to jettison books students told me they could not get through because they were “too flowery” (a.k.a. evocative or wordy), along with reading that was “too annoying” (a.k.a. too reflective of someone else’s *contemporary* military experience).
2. For instance, the most popular course I taught—on military advising—could only be taught in small sections; it *had* to be run as a seminar. I first offered this class in 1999 as soon as I realized that no forum existed for the study of advising even though advising represented an essential SOF mission. From the beginning, students preferred historical first-person accounts to anything contemporary. I structured the readings more or less chronologically so that we reviewed the history of advisory efforts, at the same time each highlighted a certain set of issues. I did end up retiring a few books over the

years, but anyone who took the class in 2019 would have read at least some of the same books as those who took it in 1999. This did not just help turn class into fieldwork for me—in terms of how consistently or differently each cohort responded to the same kinds of questions and dilemmas over time—but it also meant that I could invite back former students who had advised or had commanded advisors since taking the class themselves. It was always rewarding to have a Special Operations Task Force (SOTF), Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF), or Special Forces Group commander come back and be reflective about their experiences.<sup>4</sup>

3. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, our students were O3s, and the preponderance came from the Army. As captains, our Army officers generally found out partway through the program whether they had been selected for resident Army Command and General Staff College and thereby could consider themselves in the top half of their year group with better than average career prospects. You could see all of them begin to recalculate accordingly, but none became especially cynical. Then, for much of the GWOT, virtually all of our students were O4s, and as requirements for intermediate-level education (ILE) changed, resident ILE was no longer a discriminator, which meant that, as majors, our Army students never knew exactly

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<sup>4</sup> A SOTF, or Special Operations Task Force, is typically overseen by an O5 (Army lieutenant colonel or Navy commander). A CJSOTF, or Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, is typically overseen by an O6 (Army colonel or Navy captain).

where they stood vis-à-vis one another and consequently they expended considerable energy in extracurricular networking and politicking. This became one unfortunate source of cynicism, though far more pernicious was what was transpiring—or not transpiring—in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> By 2018, student cynicism was so palpable and so extensive regarding the wars, senior leaders, and policy making in general that there were very few topics we could not discuss. This marked a sea change, especially considering that right after 9/11 it had been impossible to even vaguely suggest that the 9/11 hijackers were anything but cowards. By 2018, it was totally acceptable for me to refer to at least some jihadis as “true believers.”

4. However, whereas analyzing and critiquing U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy became easier over time, referring to domestic American politics grew harder. Again, for at least the first several years after 9/11, students did not want to hear anything critical said about President George W. Bush or his policies. But then, with the 2008 election, politics became a minefield in the classroom. Unless students already knew where each other’s heads were, they said very little that might indicate they leaned one way or another along the conservative-liberal spectrum. As it happens, the faculty also became more politically riven, though our deepest differences had more to do with the prosecution of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and where we saw Washington erring, some but

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Simons, “Cynicism: A Brief Look at a Troubling Topic,” *Small Wars Journal*, 16 February 2021.

not all of which was colored by the disciplinary lenses through which we analyzed both.

5. We were a very unusual interdisciplinary department, less because we seldom agreed with one another about how best to conduct, or even study and analyze, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and irregular warfare—our *raison d'être*—than because we never took our “shoulda-woulda-coulda” disagreements out on the students. Instead, we exposed our officers to wildly divergent and often contradictory points of view. Students benefited tremendously from this, though it did occasionally create difficulties when first and second readers on a thesis disagreed about a student’s approach. Even so, the best among us routinely deferred to whatever approach the *student* wanted to take since this was their thesis. I should add that there was an overall gender/prior service/disciplinary bias that consistently ran through the department: while male faculty acknowledged that “culture” was important, they never considered it quite as important as “strategy” or whatever subject they happened to teach.

Over time, two additional changes occurred in *who* we taught: warrant officers and noncommissioned officers (or senior enlisted) entered the program in small but still significant numbers, and just before I retired, SF officers no longer dominated in quite the way they had previously; they were also O3s again rather than O4s.

One final wrinkle I should mention has to do with the small size of the SOF community. Elsewhere, I have quipped that “reputational vetting” is a SOF operators’ favorite pastime. Not surprisingly, because we taught so many officers, we too earned reputations. In fact, it would be easy to trace the

lineages of students we taught based on which of their elders we had in classes and who steered their protégés our way. I was always lucky. I benefited from timing (my longevity), the subject matter I taught—culture—and the readings I assigned.

### **What Teaching Taught Me**

In truth, though, I never did really teach about culture. I actually forbade students from using the word “culture” in classes—the only word I disallowed. I did so because I wanted them to have to work through why people X might do such foreign-seeming things. I did not want them to default to using “culture” as a black box term that explains everything and nothing at the same time.

My job, in my view, was to help our students learn how to unpack others themselves. My reasoning was that our students were all adults. If they did not want to engage with the subject matter, I was not going to be able to make them. So, there was no point in using tests. I assigned books, we watched documentaries and movies, and they had to write me short thought papers. All of this usually came as a shock to them, and they initially distrusted me when I said I was not interested in having them repeat back to me anything I said. Instead, I was interested in what they thought, and I did my best to provoke them to think differently and make me think differently too.

I also felt it was a disservice to spoon-feed our students prepackaged anything. I knew that they generally craved the bottom line up front and had an outline- or PowerPoint-driven need for frameworks and takeaways. At one point fairly early on, I remember being asked if I could just give them the “3 x 5 card” summary of whatever I was trying to convey. Inwardly, this made me cringe. Here were the military’s pre-eminent practitioners of the unconventional, and they were so used to linear approaches and bullet points that they not only did not recognize how conditioned they already were, but I had to figure out how to get them to *want* to relax. Fortu-



nately, I had some credibility thanks to time spent in Somalia and elsewhere in Africa, so I could generally get them to give me the initial benefit of the doubt. I did my best to inoculate them against frustration by explaining that everything *would* connect by the end of the quarter, and I learned that it helped if I did occasionally provide them with a framework.

For instance, I updated and turned the classic ethnographic approach of beginning with the local ecology as the underlay for people's way of life into something they could carry away with them and apply more broadly. I walked them through how to play with concepts like Big Man and Chief.<sup>6</sup> Was, for example, the president of the United States a Big Man or a Chief? What about an O3? I similarly stretched terms like *acephalous* and H. H. Turney-High's *military horizon* to see how far we could push these ideas and whether they could help us reframe conventional thinking.<sup>7</sup>

I tried to remember to write on the board during my first meeting with new students a trio of aphorisms:

- Everything connects, which I treated as an anthropological truism.
- It all depends, which I told students would be the correct answer to almost anything I or anyone else would ask them.
- You just never know, which was a talismanic reminder that no matter how trivial or esoteric something might seem it could still prove useful one day.

I never assigned theory. I did not see the point since our students were not being educated or trained to become anthropologists. Instead, I walked them through theoretical ap-

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<sup>6</sup> Lamont Lindstrom, " 'Big Man': A Short Terminological History," *American Anthropologist* 83, no. 4 (1981): 900–5.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Holbert Turney-High, *Primitive War: Its Practices and Concepts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1949; repr., 1991).

proaches whenever I thought these were relevant, and I did so too as a way to subliminally remind them that the study of others is not always as straightforward as they often assumed. To this end, I also exposed them to at least some anthropological classics, such as Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Lincoln Keiser's *Friend by Day, Enemy by Night*, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard's description of fieldwork among the Azande.<sup>8</sup> One reason I assigned texts like these was to experientially teach students how much invaluable information can still be gleaned from: a) books, b) old books, and c) accessibly written old books, despite how dated they might seem. This became all the more pressing once laptops appeared and everyone turned to Google during discussions so that they could one-up one another and me with information that they often were not knowledgeable enough to properly vet. With laptops open, too, many students also could not help but engage in a weird form of competitive hyperlink hopscotch. Eventually, I banned laptops and tablets in seminars.

While it was critical that our students learn how to better vet sources, it was clear that it made no sense to expect them to remember what the differences were between Japanese and Kohistani (Pakistan) notions of honor, for example. One faculty trap I did my best to avoid was to assume students would be able to retain the same information I did. Just because I drew on the same material repeatedly, and it was germane to me, did not mean that the students absorbed it in the way I intended. I also knew students mentally dumped information at a prodigious rate. I did my best to head this off by never giving them exams and by telling them up front that there was

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1946; repr., Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Lincoln Keiser, *Friend by Day, Enemy by Night: Organized Vengeance in a Kohistani Community* (Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1991); and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976).

no reason for them to commit any ethnographic information to memory. Instead, we were going to use ethnography during our discussions for compare and contrast purposes.

Concepts, concepts, concepts—that is what I sought to push. And I pushed questions. In fact, along with hoping that students would retain an appreciation for certain concepts, as well as an appreciation for context—and an appreciation for the significance of context *as* a concept—I wanted them to walk away with at least one overarching, scalable, stretchable question. Ideally, this question would act as a mnemonic device and would remind them about what they should want to learn, no matter who they were interacting with.

For instance, the takeaway question from Anthropology of Conflict was: What makes an X an X? This grew out of our discussions during the course of the quarter about identity, values, and people's priorities. For example, we comparatively and recursively tackled what made Japanese *Japanese* (ca. World War II), Germans *German*, Americans *American*, etc., along with what makes radicals *radical*, moderates *moderate*, and SEALs *SEALs*, or SF *SF*.

The question I distilled out of the cases we examined in Low Intensity Conflict: Africa was: Who is where vis-à-vis whom, and what? One of the things I hammered hard in that course was the significance of both literal and figurative positioning (e.g., in terms of resources, geography, demography, socioeconomics, etc.) as well as timing. I sought to drive home the idea that no country or conflict should ever be considered in isolation. For instance, it is impossible to understand the 1994 genocide in Rwanda or its aftermath without also studying events and dynamics in Burundi, Zaire/Congo, and Belgium prior to and after independence, Cold War politics, and the list goes on. Or as one of our Pakistani officers pointed out every time he was subjected to the term *Af-Pak*, which clearly grated on him: What about India? China? Russia? The -stans? The United States? And untold corporate players?

The question I devised for Political Anthropology: Methods of Social Control was the corollary to who is where vis-à-vis whom, and what? This corollary question was: Who can do what to whom, using what? Meanwhile, the more orthogonal our subject matter, the stickier each of these questions became, so that reading books about bananas, Henrietta Lacks, and Robert Mugabe, or seeing movies about Rumspringa and Wounded Knee still resonate with at least some of my former students.<sup>9</sup>

### Research and Other Opportunities

Whenever I visited former students in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, I was mindful of the value of questions from a wholly different angle. When I was at a SOTF, CJSOTF, or on a firebase, I was still a professor, but *I* was now the one out of my element in our graduates' realm. I knew better than to offer my two cents. But I still could not stop myself from asking questions. Sometimes I asked questions to which I knew I did not know the answer. Sometimes I asked questions to which I thought I knew the answer. And sometimes I posed questions that I was pretty sure no one else had yet asked a commander. Because my asking questions was expected, I learned over time that this was also the most useful way for me to be suggestive. I saved most of my critiques and observations for scraps of paper in my pocket or for classes, which is one of the reasons graduates in command positions invited me into the field; they wanted to make sure I stayed up-to-date on

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<sup>9</sup> Dan Koeppel, *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit that Changed the World* (New York: Plume, 2008); Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Gale/Cengage, 2010); Peter Godwin, *The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011); a documentary about the Amish and rumspringa as seen in *Devil's Playground*, directed by Lucy Walker (New York: Stick Figure Productions, 2002), 77 min.; and a movie about the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre as in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, directed by Yves Simoneau (Montecito, CA: Wolf Films and Travelers Rest Films, 2007).

the operational environment students were coming from and would be returning to.

Getting to visit units downrange and seeing former and future students do their thing was one of the great rewards of the job. It also provided the most vivid possible reminder that we were participating in a mutual educational enterprise. Not only did trips to the field grant me a deeper understanding of the challenges teams and staffs faced, but my willingness to visit cinched any number of relationships. These visits also constituted a form of fieldwork that I then fed back into projects for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and others.<sup>10</sup>

Here, too, is how NPS proved to be unusual. As faculty at DOD's only research university, we were expected to bring in reimbursable research dollars, which meant finding a sponsor, which meant coming up with relevant and timely projects year after year. The upside to this was that, although filling out the requisite paperwork for travel and research grew increasingly onerous over time (particularly given our Orwellian Institutional Review Board), successful projects led to other successful projects.

My most consistent sponsor was the Office of Net Assessment in OSD (ONA has often been described as the Pentagon's internal think tank). Initially my deliverables were papers. Over time, I began to run sponsored long-term strategy seminars. I would select a cross section of students to join me for one or two quarters on a project of ONA's or my choosing, and the students and I would then brief our results both in Monterey and in the Pentagon.<sup>11</sup> One of ONA's aims was to enable promising mid-career officers to think at the strategic level. One of my aims was to tackle something that no one yet

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Anna Simons, *21st Challenges of Command: A View from the Field* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Among project topics were: strategic blindside, regional stability, SOF 2030, SOF in China, strategic ambush, and existential fears.

had given sufficient thought, so that it was not just me transmitting predigested ideas to students, but all of us working together as a tiger team.

As often as I could, I combined these seminars with research efforts. In doing so, I borrowed from a different set of NPS experiences. Beginning in the early 2000s, I participated in a number of civil-military relations seminars. Michael Mensch, a retired Army colonel, and the Africa program director of the Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR), located at NPS, had spent 15 years living and working all over the continent as a defense attaché—he was the practitioner-facilitator. To help him conduct weeklong workshops on the continent, he always tapped a civilian and usually a female Africanist to travel with him.

This model of a male practitioner paired with a female academic did not just work extraordinarily well but made a deep impression on me because I saw it significantly impact our seminarists. Thus, when I was asked by a deputy assistant secretary of defense to undertake a project on the Horn of Africa, I immediately wrote into the budget travel money so that I could take one of our students as a practitioner-researcher with me. I then did the same for subsequent projects. Indeed, unless I was traveling to visit former students in Iraq or Afghanistan, I always took at least one and sometimes two students abroad with me. They invariably viewed things sufficiently differently from me so that our synergy paid untold dividends, whether we were looking into India's counterinsurgency lessons learned or South Koreans' existential fears. In fact, one such project led one of our graduates to suggest to his command that they sign up everyone in our program who had prior experience in East Africa to work on a yearlong project for that command. This project led to multiple research trips for students, including one that enabled a Tanzanian colonel to take two American majors back to Tanzania with him. Each of these majors was then assigned back to East Africa after NPS, so that the initial project redounded in multiple ways.

In addition to engaging in direct research efforts for OSD and various commands, I also participated in the Regional Security Education Program (RSEP), which was also run out of NPS. Much as CCMR's Africa program represented one of the best uses of tax dollars I had seen in Africa—since CCMR's only aim was to facilitate senior members of a host nation's military, government, and civil society meeting together, often for the first time—RSEP was another win-win-win. In response to the USS *Cole* (DDG 67) bombing in Yemen in 2000, a team of two to four academics rode with every Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) and Carrier Group on their transit across the Atlantic or Pacific.<sup>12</sup> The aim was to provide regional orientation to wherever the group might be headed: the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, or East Asia. Ironically, RSEP lectures were really intended for the ship and the ARG or Carrier Group staffs, but since Navy officers were usually the busiest individuals on board undermanned ships, it was invariably the Marines and naval aviators who attended our talks most often instead.

As with my visits to U.S. bases and theaters overseas, nothing I could learn secondhand, either by reading or by talking to sailors and Marines about shipboard life, would have granted me the same insights as did getting to live aboard ship or sharing a cramped stateroom with women who were decades younger than me. So, yes, while I was an educator on these floats, I was also continually and continuously being educated myself. This was true no matter which component of the military I spent time with—an aspect of teaching in PME that should be considered essential, especially for those of us in the social sciences. Otherwise, how can we gauge what is most pertinent, let alone determine how best to convey what is most relevant to our customers or consumers?

Of course, I never did regard members of the military as either customers or consumers. Instead, they always repre-

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<sup>12</sup> Or, in my case once, I was a team of one.

sented the thin line in the sand between all of us civilians and harm, so I always considered it self-interested on my part to want them to adeptly handle anything or anyone they might encounter abroad. This is what struck me initially in Somalia in 1989: all four members of the Mobile Training Team there were technically proficient. But the MTT was not especially well prepared—none of the four tried to see either Somalia or themselves through Somali eyes. They also did not have anyone other than their Somali counterparts to assist them with making sense of what they saw.

This is one reason predeployment briefings have always struck me as deficient. Here is where the RSEP program got things a little more right: lectures were offered during a five-, six-, or seven-day period; no one was subjected to a check-the-block session on region and culture during a suite of other predeployment trainings. This also made RSEPs a better approach than SOF's post-9/11 notion of an "Academic Week," when people like me would be given a two-hour slot during which we were expected to condense highlights from already ridiculously condensed quarter-long courses. Whenever I did these sorts of lectures, whether about all of sub-Saharan Africa or *just* about Somalia, I was all too acutely aware of all of the things I was not saying—and was not able to say. I also knew how little of what I relayed was likely to stick.

Thus, if I could wave a magic wand, I would still want the military to do what I first thought it should do after sitting through my first predeployment briefing 29 years ago, when I was a fly on the wall: have a regional "expert" or two meet with the team or group *once* it is deployed. Let everyone recover from jet lag. Let those who are visiting country X for the first time sniff the air and get a sense of the place, and then, during that initial 48- or 72-hour window when first-time visitors are usually most open-minded and keen to *want* to make sense of the strangeness around them, bring in the experts. Experts need to interact with deployed forces just *before* erroneous impressions start to gel, especially since everyone in



uniform has been conditioned to think so linearly and in such American-centric ways.

## Conclusion

Of course, I would also be remiss if I did not add the caveat that cross-cultural expertise itself is a misnomer and determining who is an expert is always problematic. As anyone who has been around the military for any length of time knows, even military culture changes. Thus, the best any student of a place, or organization, or set of organizations can hope to do is to develop as much familiarity as is possible and then strive to keep a finger on the pulse. We all develop shortcuts, usually via trusted written or flesh-and-blood sources. The catch is that we need the wherewithal to stay up to date, which takes time. The catch with time for those working in the DOD is that time usually comes out of hide. Or, this certainly has been true since 9/11.

In fact, one of the more serious downsides to NPS's overall academic model, one that became chronic once everything ratcheted up in the wake of 9/11, is that there were always more opportunities than there was time. It was never possible to truly dig in or build on academic work in anything but a short burst followed by short burst manner. Sometimes it was possible for me to circle back to the Horn of Africa or to some other issue or problem. But as a researcher, I was always sponsor-beholden. I did not necessarily work on what *I* thought was most important, though I did my best to lobby for what I thought was most pressing. I also have to say, I was extraordinarily lucky. Mr. Andrew Marshall, the director of the Office of Net Assessment (ONA), for whom I did most of my work, had long been interested in anthropology. In fact, it was Lionel Tiger (an anthropologist of considerable stature) who first brought me to Mr. Marshall's attention; Dr. Tiger had worked with ONA for years. This meant he was also in then-secretary of the Air Force James G. Roche's orbit since Secretary Roche, too, was an ONA denizen. Together, both these men were

close to General John P. Jumper. No wonder General Jumper was predisposed to want to infuse more language-and-culture education and awareness into the Air Force when he was its chief of staff.

So, how encouraging was it that I found myself one fall day, in General Jumper's executive dining room with more general officers arrayed around the table than I had ever seen in one place. I had been invited to explain to him and to them what the Air Force might gain from the same sorts of things I was teaching at NPS. Talk about easy: I had never had a problem proselytizing on behalf of what I knew our students found useful. Student enthusiasm alone was a testament to how much value officers found in being able to bring anthropological concepts to bear on the world at large and to their line of work in particular. Nor, thinking back to that day, would I say that the value of anthropology has diminished—at all.

Today, Anthropology of Conflict remains among the Defense Analysis Department classes our flag officer and recent graduates alike cite as having been one of the most valuable they took. It also happens to be one of their favorites while they are taking it. Meanwhile, who is teaching it in my wake? The “everything connects” answer is an anthropology PhD who happened to take one of the very first iterations of the course from me back when he was an undergraduate at UCLA. Unlike me, Siamak Naficy stuck with biological anthropology; and though he did not do fieldwork abroad, he was born in Iran and remains fluent in Farsi. I knew he had an excellent reputation teaching at one of Southern California's best community colleges, so when he followed his future wife up the coast to Santa Cruz, I thought aha, who better to help me teach our students. Proof, after a fashion, that not only does everything connect (and all depend), but you just never know. Except, I did already know Siamak and how talented he is. I also knew that anthropology was now considered a core discipline in the Defense Analysis Department thanks to the foresight of the individuals who decided to hire me, thanks

to our students' enthusiasm, and thanks to several colleagues who taught related courses about culture as well as about low intensity conflict in regions other than Africa.

In retrospect, I would still contend that culture was never considered to be *as* important in our department as political science or strategy, probably because it does not lend itself to 2 x 2 tables. But it turns out that anthropology's unformulaic nature made it that much more intriguing to our students, especially since they knew they were going to have to go back out and operate abroad. That reality alone played to Siamak's and my strengths, which were classically anthropological: we got to be a little bit heretical, a little bit irreverent and, thanks to our bottom-up/inside-out stance, we could not help but try to be *disarmingly* provocative too.

