American Libraries Abroad: U.S. Military Libraries

A. ELIZABETH SCHWARTZ

While the United States Information Agency libraries abroad are designed to serve non-Americans, the United States military libraries in foreign countries are there to serve the American communities that have developed in response to U.S. military commitments abroad. These communities normally consist of men and women in uniforms, their families, and U.S. civilian employees accompanying the armed forces to perform numerous professional and technical duties.

Most of the military libraries overseas fall into two categories: the libraries in the schools for dependent children and the special services or post libraries. The latter were originally categorized as public libraries but now are referred to as general libraries, for lack of a more descriptive term, since by demand their services blend those of the public, college and special libraries. They are the primary source of library materials and services for adults at a U.S. military installation abroad. In addition there are the medical and legal collections in hospitals and judge advocate offices. Library clerks normally take care of these specialized collections. The general libraries and the librarians who operate them will be the primary concern of this article.

Most U.S. military communities abroad range in size from 1,000 to 10,000 people, although in a few concentrated areas the population will be greater. Other than in combat areas, such as Vietnam is currently, the military personnel and U.S. civilian employees make up only about 50 percent of the total population. Babies, toddlers, school age children, wives and grandparents complete the community. The great range of reading levels and tastes represented perhaps is most comparable to that found in a college town in the United States, and the general library's book collection and other materials reflect this wide

A. Elizabeth Schwartz is Director, Army Library Program, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C.

JANUARY, 1972
variety. A review of the books on the shelves in one of the libraries reveals three basic differences when compared with a public library of comparable size in the United States: (1) the emphasis on reading of primary interest to men, (2) the presence of much basic college reading material, and (3) the recency of the books. The latter primarily is due to generally cramped quarters and the continued need to weed out the less appealing books and those of little informative value in order to make room for the latest publications and currently popular titles.

The United States Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine general libraries abroad total approximately 460. They are located in seventeen countries and are operated by approximately 240 American librarians, most of them with a master's degree in library science or with equivalent academic training. In addition to the libraries there are hundreds of field collections of hardbound or paperbound books, or both, to make reading materials as accessible as possible to the men regardless of the isolation of a military unit. The cost of these sizable library programs is about $13.5 million per year. The libraries in the elementary and secondary schools operated overseas for the dependent children of the American military are staffed by approximately 190 librarians. Some have teaching responsibilities in addition to operating the library.

The general libraries originally were established overseas at or toward the end of World War II to furnish recreational reading to the men. However, during the 1950s demands for a different type of library service began to be felt. Social and political pressures as well as rapid technological changes required new skills and knowledge of the men and women in the armed forces. Throughout the services existing education programs were expanded and many new ones established, often without thought to the library support needed. As military duty assignments became more involved with new techniques in management, with complex and sensitive political questions and with the application and maintenance of highly sophisticated weapons and other equipment, the need for ready access to current, factual information in order to get the job done became apparent. In the overseas areas these accumulating demands for more and more library materials and services fell on the general library.

The United States Armed Forces operate extensive education programs for their personnel. In the overseas areas these programs are confined largely to off-duty classes held in the evenings. Education centers offer courses in basic high school subjects, languages, and vocational subjects related to military occupational specialties. College
level correspondence courses with the United States Armed Forces Institute and contracts with U.S. universities for the provision of on-post classes help military personnel acquire baccalaureate and master’s degrees. The world-wide campus of the University of Maryland reaches nearly every air force base and navy and army installation in Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific area. Florida State University offers graduate and undergraduate courses in the Canal Zone and other parts of the Caribbean. In Europe courses leading to the master’s degree in international relations, education, systems management and business and public administration are offered by a number of universities. The Universities of Hawaii, Oklahoma and Maryland offer graduate programs in the Pacific area.

The general military libraries have the responsibility of supporting these college courses and must meet accrediting association standards if the courses are to be accredited. During the past decade this responsibility has accounted for considerable effort and funds to expand book collections, reference materials and back files of periodicals in designated libraries. Library services to support college extension courses present unique problems even in the United States and this is especially so in foreign countries where sources of English-language materials are limited, supply lines are long, and students located at several installations commute many miles after a workday to attend class. Wide duplication of materials, union lists of holdings, liberal interlibrary loan and individual borrowing policies are used to the utmost to assist military scholars in their studies. It is not uncommon for graduating students at the annual University of Maryland graduation ceremonies in the banner-draped old hall of the University of Heidelberg to have studied for their degrees while on two or more overseas assignments as well as in the United States. One of them could name every one of the army librarians that had assisted him along the way.

Just as industry depends on published information and technical reports on which to base many of its decisions, so do the armed forces. In the overseas areas, the general military library must supply most of this type of technical information required for normal work performance. Military librarians often term this service “mission support.” Information needs range over many disciplines from complex engineering data to foreign protocol. The base or post libraries located in areas where there are large concentrations of U.S. military personnel generally have extensive reference collections and specialized materials in one or more subject fields and in particular media. They serve as regional reference and interlibrary loan centers to which the librarians in the smaller li-

JANUARY, 1972
libraries can refer when they have exhausted their own resources.

The series of articles under the heading, "Armed Forces Libraries," in the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science furnish an excellent picture of current military library programs, including historical background and policies governing the general libraries both in the United States and overseas. The overseas military librarian operates under the same general policies as those governing his stateside counterpart. However, some regulations applicable to military libraries in the United States are considered only as guidelines for operations overseas since a flexible response to local conditions is necessary. Geographic and other environmental factors, as well as the mission of the military force, influence the organization and type of library services and operating procedures. As a result there is considerable variance between overseas commands even within the same branch of service.

The library programs of the two largest overseas army commands are excellent examples of geography influencing organization. The command in Europe is confined primarily to the southern part of West Germany. The 114 libraries and 662 field collections are organized into one library system headed by a staff librarian with an administrative office centralizing funding and personnel administration; a large reference library with a specialized collection to serve the army headquarters staff and to provide backup support to all of the other libraries; and a library service center providing centralized acquisitions and cataloging, although selection of materials is decentralized to individual librarians. The service center with its union catalog of all holdings also serves as the interlibrary loan center for the total system. Area librarian supervisors are assigned to the subordinate military districts and serve as consultants and advisers to the less experienced operating librarians.

In contrast, the army command in the Pacific stretches from Japan and Korea in the north to Vietnam in the south, from Hawaii west to Thailand. Six library systems each with its own administrative office, library service center, and command reference center support the six subordinate army commands located in five countries and the state of Hawaii. The six systems together total 138 libraries and 423 field collections. Each system is administered by a librarian on the staff of the army commander. Within recent years U.S. Army command in the Pacific has increased policy guidance to the six subordinate commands by the establishment of a staff librarian position at its headquarters in Hawaii. To further improve library services throughout the Pacific area, the army and the United States Air Force in the Pacific have launched several cooperative ventures. Among these are a joint interlibrary loan
regulation, union lists of periodical holdings, publicity materials and annual training workshops for the librarians. Other activities to bring greater cohesiveness to the six army library systems are actually in existence or under discussion, but geographic influence on communications and supply lines, differing missions of each subordinate command, and host country considerations force continuation of a basically decentralized army library program in the Pacific area.

The general military library’s services are designed to attract non-readers as well as readers. This policy may have originated with one of those good commanders who through the ages have recognized the value of providing many forms of recreation for their men in order to combat boredom. Librarians have grasped the policy as a unique opportunity to expose men who are not library users to the information and life enrichment to be found in books. When suffering the shock of being in a foreign country for any extended period, removed from family and home community, most individuals long for and seek the security of familiar surroundings. Capitalizing on this urge, the overseas military librarian attracts the non-reader by changing the image of the library from an impersonal public building to that of a home.

Architecture and interior design are key factors in this subterfuge. Libraries in overseas military installations are usually in prefabricated or cement block buildings with dimensions appropriate to a homelike interior design. Domestic-type living room furniture in the reading areas and music listening rooms creates a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Other furniture is selected as much for its homelike appearance as its functional use. Bright draperies, rugs, pictures (many of them good art reproductions), plants and flowers further develop the desired effect. Many of the books, looking new in their plastic covers, are shelved within easy reach of a comfortable armchair. A few with provocative titles or jackets are placed on end tables with studied casualness. Racks prominently display familiar-looking magazines from home, and there is usually a music room where one or more men may listen to favorite records. Smoking is permitted throughout the library. Except in quiet study rooms, there is generally a low hum of voices and activity. The staff is friendly and purposely takes time to chat with those who want to talk with someone.

The inexperienced library user is constantly kept in mind in designing the procedures for using the library and in the organization of the library materials. Most of the overseas libraries have 5,000 to 15,000 current books, except those libraries designated as central or main libraries, which have approximately 30,000 or more volumes. Although
Library of Congress cards are used as much as possible, simplified cataloging is normal and the use of many cross references helps guide the user. Some librarians, following the example of many foreign libraries, have divided the card catalog into three separate files for author, title and subject and they report that users find those indexes easier to use than the dictionary catalog. Well placed directional signs and numerous shelf labels lead browsers in their search for something to read. Circulation systems are simple and fines are not charged for overdue books.

Overseas military librarians may have been among the first to realize the potential of the paperback book for turning non-readers into readers. The special armed services editions distributed overseas during World War II effectively demonstrated the appeal of a pocket-sized book. As the paperback book industry has grown, the military librarians have used these relatively cheap books more and more to get reading material to the men no matter where they are or where they are going. Collections of paperbound books of 1,000 to 2,000 books including mass market and quality trade titles are used in the combat areas to satisfy some of the recreational reading needs. The low overhead cost of handling these collections, the ease with which reading material can be made easily accessible to the men, and the appeal of the paperbound book for young people make it almost certain that the use of paperbound book collections will increase both overseas and at military installations in the United States.

The military libraries overseas are small and serve a relatively small community. Because of the mobility and frequent changes in military structure, many of them are short-lived. Complicated library procedures designed to assist scholars doing historical research are out of place and can often work against accomplishment of the general military library’s mission. The successful overseas military librarian must be highly creative in adapting, and sufficiently fearless to ignore if necessary, traditional library practices in order to provide the varied library materials and services that will meet the needs and interests of the heterogeneous group of library users and non-users normally found in an overseas military community. Except for the librarians assigned to the large central libraries, the service centers or the headquarters offices, most overseas librarians are responsible for two or more libraries and work independently. Days are seldom routine and the unexpected becomes the norm. It is not unusual for a librarian to be called on the telephone at one library and told that one of his other libraries is being moved. Although much of the work can be catego-
rized as administrative, since he or she is the only librarian available, duties run the gamut of library functions. For example, a day's work may include locating information for the commander or one of his staff, helping a child select a book, discussing with a professor the supplemental reading for his next course, instructing some soldiers on how to use the library, selecting books for a book order or a bibliography, training a new assistant, helping one of the wives find material for a club program, or joining one of the men in a laugh about a cartoon he wants to share with someone.

The influence of the American military library abroad on the people or library profession of the host country is primarily indirect. One of the generally recognized missions of the overseas military library is the promotion of an understanding and knowledge of the culture and history of the country in which the installation is located. Most Americans arrive in a foreign country with only a superficial knowledge of the country and its people, and to most the language is foreign. This is especially true for those assigned for the first time to a country in the Far East and Middle East. In most of the overseas libraries, special collections on the host country are separated from the main book collection and displayed with pertinent pictures and artifacts. In some of the larger overseas libraries, these collections are extensive and include out-of-print English-language materials. Even in the smaller libraries, however, the collections offer a range of books appealing to many reading levels and interests. As much as possible, local books and periodicals in English are included. Recordings of local music, art reproductions, and other audiovisual materials that can be used to transmit a knowledge of the country are collected. Programs featuring local speakers, films, demonstrations, tours, bibliographies and short book lists promote these special collections. Language recordings and text-books are available for home use, and local publications in the host country language promote language proficiency as do television sets in some of the libraries. The host country collections are some of the most used materials in the libraries. Numerous duplicate copies and the continual purchase of replacements put some titles in a local best seller category.

Many local citizens work in the military libraries as clerks and technicians. In some instances these individuals have worked with the American libraries since World War II. Others have used their experience to progress to responsible positions in local libraries. Also, former library assistants have become interested in librarianship as a ca-
career and have, or are currently working toward, a library degree. Recently established library schools in Japan and Korea list among their first students former employees of the U.S. Armed Forces who gained their practical knowledge of library work in the military libraries. Wherever possible, there has been both personal and official support as well as continual encouragement by American library supervisors to any local employee showing potential and having a desire to pursue studies for a library career. The American librarians have personally sponsored and financed some of these employees who otherwise would not have been able to go to school. Three local assistants working in military libraries in Thailand, Japan and Okinawa were sent to Hawaii to take the library science course sponsored by the International Technical Institute and the East-West Center. These courses were for upgrading skills and providing exposure to American library systems; the U.S. military libraries in Hawaii assisted by providing on-the-job training opportunities to the thirty-five students who attended.

In some of the countries where there are U.S. military libraries, library schools have been established and professional publications and other materials have been donated. If proximity of the military installation permits, library school classes visit the libraries. The free services, the music listening room, the circulation of phonograph records, the open book stacks and the rental collections of rotating popular best sellers subscribed to by some of the libraries are some of the services that provoke the most favorable comment from students and, in fact, from most practicing librarians who are visitors. Not long ago, a library school student at the Hamburg Bibliotekarschule in Germany, on her own initiative, spent two weeks at the U.S. Army's large library in Frankfurt to observe American techniques and operations. She worked as one of the staff and reported the experience to be one of professional growth and rewarding personal accomplishment. She found the ease with which a patron could use the library particularly impressive.

Interlibrary loan often serves as the bridge between American military librarians and the librarians of the host country. The search for information or a particular book initiates a friendship leading to exchange visits, attendance at meetings, swapping of excess materials, or even collaborating on a project. Two years ago the frustration of locating formation about the countries and people in Asia led an ambitious group of American librarians in the Pacific area to start compiling directories of the library resources located in the various Asian countries where they were stationed. Working closely with local librarians and library associations, they are beginning the identification of the
vast information resources in these Asian countries. The directories include the names and addresses, holdings, special collections and other pertinent information about local libraries and collections, and about U.S. libraries and those of other governments. The directory on Korea alone gives detailed information on forty-four libraries, excluding the U.S. military libraries, and general information on the total library resources and library activities in Korea.

For several years, one or more of the military librarians have attended German Library Association meetings, and the Korean Library Association lists several as members who attend the meetings. The armed forces librarians in Europe have held annual meetings in Wiesbaden, Frankfurt, Berlin and Vicenza and local librarians are invited. At the most recent meeting the director of Bertoliane Library, Vicenza, spoke on the Italian library system. She revealed that at the 1971 Italian Library Association meeting she was to present a paper about American libraries in Europe, and that she would promote open stacks, reading rooms in libraries, smaller libraries closer and more accessible to people—all based on her visits to the U.S. military libraries and from her contacts with the American libraries.

The influence of the American military libraries perhaps has been more pronounced on the countries in the Pacific area than on the European countries where public libraries as we know them have existed for many years. In Okinawa local librarians and officials wanted to broaden the annual library week celebrated in the military libraries to a Ryukyan-American Library Week to promote citizen support of local library programs. Each year thousands of Okinawans tour the U.S. military libraries in celebration of the week and have an opportunity to observe American libraries in action. Host country persons working at U.S. installations abroad are sometimes authorized to use the U.S. libraries. Those with a knowledge of English usually take advantage of this privilege and learn of the services given in an American library. In Korea, special collections of Korean books, magazines and newspapers are in some of the libraries located in areas where there are many Korean employees. Altogether the collections include approximately 7,800 titles which may be borrowed for home use or read in the library. The reaction of one of these Korean employees to the U.S. military library which he uses was recently published in the Korean-language section of the American unit's newspaper. The translation reads:

An ordinary looking building, surrounded by trees, stands almost invisibly on the way to the swimming pool and Korea House in the recreational area of Camp Red Cloud, it is the I Corps Library.
Far different from its outward appearance, the interior decoration is a view of splendor. It is comprised of a book collection, music room, reading room, lounge, and office. The book collection that covers all the branches of science is filled with 13,000 volumes in English plus 800 volumes in the Korean language for KATUSAs [Koreans Augmented to U. S. Army] to borrow for a two-week period.

In the music room, a highly efficient phonograph is provided for stereo music which includes a selection of 1,000 records and 50 tapes with 3,000 tunes. This enables us to appreciate music from around the world here at Camp Red Cloud.

When you get tired of reading books and listening to the music, you can relax in the lounge with a cup of coffee. In the lounge, Korean daily newspapers, weekly news magazines, and monthly magazines are always ready for you so you can keep up with what is happening in the country.

In this library, with its fantastic facilities, which we always dream of, for our own community, there is one more attraction that adds to the pleasant atmosphere . . . the librarian assigned to the library, pleases your eyesight with tasteful flower designs and encourages you to utilize this library more.

The suitable interior temperature plus an academic atmosphere, four Korean employees and one KATUSA personnel plus . . . exerting their utmost efforts to offer better service, are there for your reading, music enjoyment and meditation.

Several foreign military organizations have sought the assistance of U.S. military librarians in order to study and observe library services provided military units. Three countries, Sweden, India and Vietnam, sent librarians to the United States for this purpose. The U.S. Armed Forces and their overseas librarians have assisted in establishing or enlarging both military and civilian libraries in many of the countries in which they are located. Primarily this assistance has been in the form of materials. As libraries close, if the books are not needed elsewhere, many are donated to host country colleges and universities or public libraries rather than suffer the heavy cost of shipping used books to the United States. Their normal heavy workload prevents most American military librarians from taking an active part in local library activities; however, one librarian in Vietnam who was fluent in French worked closely with the Vietnamese in planning and establishing several public school libraries, giving talks to groups of Vietnamese, helping in the training of teachers to operate the libraries, and arranging for the donation of thousands of books by organizations in the U.S. to various institutions in Vietnam including the Vietnamese National Library and the Buddhist University of Saigon.

This article has been based on personal experience and information on current activities furnished by many librarians with more recent
knowledge. American military librarians have been stationed outside the United States for twenty-six or more years. The actual number of individuals is unknown and the many professional contacts they have had with local librarians are unrecorded. The U.S. military libraries abroad serve to demonstrate one means—American style—of providing a great variety of library services to a community. They are not laboratories from which local librarians learn philosophies and techniques that are always suitable for their own communities. It remains for the many librarians in the countries which have played host to the Americans to assess and record the good and bad influence of the U.S. military libraries on their own library systems.

References