



by Jake Kohlman

As I filled out my location preferences ahead of Intermediate Level Education (ILE), I knew I wanted to try something other than the traditional path of the Army's Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I considered sister service schools like the Naval War College in Rhode Island or the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California but ultimately decided, after discussion with my wife, to put a foreign service school, the Ecole de Guerre in France, as my number one preference.

A few weeks later I was thrilled to learn I had received the assignment with the [Schools of Other Nations](#) program (SON) and would be PCSing with my family to study in Paris.

If you are a Captain promotable or Major who is resident-select, I highly recommend you put attending a foreign service school at the top of your list. A foreign service school will challenge you professionally and give you a different perspective from your peers going to CGSC. Locations may vary by Year Group but generally the SON program includes France, England, Australia, Brazil, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany, Kuwait, and more. The non-English speaking foreign schools have minimum language requirements; I was able to go to Paris in part because of the French skills I had acquired while in the Army.

I went to France with the intention of learning as much as I could about the French military, improving my French language skills, and take full advantage of this unique opportunity the Army had given me. I attended the French Army's Ecole de Guerre-Terre (EdGT) and then, in my second year, the joint Ecole de Guerre (EdG). We conducted planning exercises, attended lectures, wrote papers, and had daily discussions, almost all of it done in French. Every day I learned from and with a group of incredibly intelligent French officers in order to understand their ways of thinking and problem solving, their military history and doctrine, and how they plan and conduct operations.

Many if not most of the French officers had served with Americans before in Afghanistan, Syria, Africa, and other various NATO assignments. They were knowledgeable on American doctrine and had impressive command of American military history. They were all around excellent officers and most spoke English, often quite well.

I learned a tremendous amount from my fellow international students at EdG as well, officers from countries like the United Kingdom, Mali, Estonia, Netherlands, India, and North Macedonia.

True, I have served throughout my career with foreign officers in American schools, at IBOLC, Ranger School, and during the Q Course. However, it was an eye-opening experience being one of the "international" students this time around.

**Family Matters.** Attending a foreign service school was not without its challenges. Before making the decision, you should have a serious discussion with your family. Language barriers are real and intimidating, especially if members of the family don't speak the local language. An OCONUS PCS is not what anyone would describe as a fun process (and was particularly unpleasant summer 2020 during COVID). There are administrative difficulties. Logging in to my .mil email or submitting documents to my higher headquarters required using my CAC on my personal computer, causing a comical amount of stress with each login worrying I would lock myself out. With no Clothing & Sales in the country, I had to fully stock all my uniform requirements in advance. However, these are small prices to pay though for such a rewarding experience.

**Language Immersion.** There were some personally humbling moments. I came back from school every day mentally exhausted from trying to keep up with a graduate-level school conducted in my non-native language. Occasionally there were moments when I had never felt so dumb in my life, usually after I made a vocabulary or grammar mistake (a daily, if not hourly, occurrence). It took many repetitions but I eventually lost any ability to feel embarrassed speaking in public in French, which may or may not be a good thing.

The [FTGN podcast](#) leads off with a quote, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?’, a question that is even more of a challenge to answer when you have the substantially reduced vocabulary that comes with a learned second language.

**A New Perspective on Doctrine.** I did not miss out on American doctrine by going to a foreign service school. Similar to how I had to improve my English grammar skills before learning French grammar I studied American doctrine to assist my study of French doctrine. As the sole U.S. Army representative and often the only American in the room I was looked to for answers or opinions whenever the United States came up, which was frequently. A planning exercise at EdGT featuring a fictional U.S. armored division required me to dig in to FMs in preparation as I’ve spent my whole career in Airborne units. Somehow after having never done a Warfighter Exercise during my time in the Army, I found myself at Fort Hood, Texas with my entire class at EdGT in support of the French 3e Division during [Warfighter 21-4](#). Move to Paris but then spend six weeks in Texas.

At the end of my foreign service ILE experience I had spent two years deeply immersed in the French military, made great friends with officers from all over the world, and learned a tremendous amount. It was a challenging, interesting, and rewarding opportunity, one that I highly recommend to anyone as they consider their ILE options.

*MAJ Jake Kohlman is a United States Army officer currently assigned to Fort Bragg who spent two years living with his family in Paris, France. They had a blast.*

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