

---

# Mission Not Impossible: Preparing For An Overseas Assignment

By

LTC Paul S. Gendrolis, USA

"Hi honey, I'm home. Guess what? Got my orders today - *we're* going to Bandaria!"

"What? *You're* going where? Good luck!"

Yes, that's right! You are about to embark on a great military adventure—THE OVERSEAS ASSIGNMENT. For some of us, this is nothing new. We've been to Germany or Korea or somewhere equally exotic and it is not a problem—just pack up and go. But for others of us who have never had this opportunity to excel in one of the military's "best kept secrets," it is the most traumatic experience we've ever encountered. But relax, it's not that bad. Trust me!

Of the many first things to do, the most important is to prepare your family. Contact your new unit of assignment as soon possible and request a sponsor and a welcome packet. The welcome packet should provide you with all manner of useful information regarding the country and your unit, to include housing, schools, exchange and commissary facilities, medical care, spouse employment, and the like. Other sources of information on your country of assignment include the library, co-workers who may have been assigned there, the Unified Command (USCENTCOM, USEUCOM, USLANTCOM, USPACOM or USSOUTHCOM) and the State Department. The more information you can obtain on the country, its geography, climate, weather, historical and political makeup, customs and traditions, economy, common daily practices and general living conditions, the easier it will be to mentally prepare for the assignment and to acclimate to your new living environment once in-country. It will also help allay any fears you or your family members may have concerning the mysteries surrounding the country. Of particular importance is becoming familiar with a country's "do's and don't's." Some countries in the Middle East require women to dress conservatively (no shorts or revealing clothing) and do not permit women to drive. Other countries will expect you to observe all local courtesies in dealing with its nationals. In some countries, you will be expected to drive on the "wrong" side of the road or park on the sidewalk!

With this information in hand, you can then plan on what to take with you. Your local transportation office (TMO) can tell you what your weight allowance is, if shipment of your car is authorized, and assist in making airline arrangements. But the best source for this information is your sponsor; check with him or her before shipping any household goods or hold baggage. Your sponsor or your new unit can give you the most current information on what things you should bring and, equally important, what things not to bring. For instance, in some countries quarters are provided, along with the full range of household items such as furniture, washer and dryer, and a soft-pack including dishes, pots and pans, cooking utensils, linens, towels. In other countries, little is provided so you are authorized to ship your full weight allowance. If you have to lease/rent your quarters, you need to know the electrical power supply rating (110 or 220 volts and 50 or 60 hz). Will this adequately run your appliances, such as the microwave oven, or the television and stereo system, or will transformers be required?

Knowledge of your country will also help you to decide what to ship and what to store, especially items which have high sentimental or monetary value (family heirlooms, baby pictures,

---

china, stamp collections, etc.). As some military members learned in Iran, Kuwait, and Somalia in recent years, if emergency evacuation is called for on short notice, you may never see some possessions again. A rule of thumb might be to leave behind those items you could not bear to lose. The point here is not to live a spartan life; take those things which will make your new house a home. But be selective in what you take—if you don't need it and can live without it, leave it behind. Also, be aware that your country might be the producer or distributor of carpets or furniture or some other commodity which could bump your actual weight over your authorization. Leave room for possessions to grow!

This leads to an equally important point, ensure you have a complete item-by-item inventory of everything you own, ship or store, above and beyond what the packer gives you. Having this full accounting of every article of clothing, toy, book, and kitchen utensil will not only help you to account for all of your possessions for insurance purposes, but will give you a good picture of what exactly you own and what each item costs for replacement. Through the wonders of modern technology, you can simplify this inventory procedure through the use of a video camera. Use it to make a visual and oral inventory of what you own. Make two copies; take one with you and leave one in a safe place, like a safety deposit box at your local bank or with a relative or close friend. If you don't own or have access to a video camera, still pictures are the next best thing. Ideally, your inventory should include serial numbers, original and replacement costs, and receipts. Since most of us don't remember to keep receipts for the little things we buy, most of us don't have them. Now is the time to start saving your receipts or, as a minimum, keep an accounting ledger. For those of you with a home computer, this additional piece of modern technology can again simplify the job.

Another important area concerns the shipment of your vehicle. In some countries, you are not authorized to ship your car, but one may be provided for your use. In some instances, you may find it cheaper and more cost effective to purchase a local car once you arrive in-country. Another option is to buy a car from a departing American; this is the case where there are resale and ownership restrictions placed on the importation of foreign cars. Some of these import restrictions are based on the make, model, or age of the car, the amount of import duty or local taxes required for its registration, and the amount of time and red tape required to get it through the customs bureaucracy. For instance, Egypt requires that imported cars be not more than two years old upon arrival in-country. Although there may be numerous "clunkers" on the road and lots of cars of questionable safety, your car will be expected to be in perfect condition. In countries where your car cannot be repaired readily, you might want to ship in a limited supply of basic spare parts, subscribe to spare parts mail order magazines, or make arrangements with your family or a good friend to ship you spare parts on a moment's notice. You should also ensure that your stateside driver's license is valid for most of your tour, and you should determine whether an international driver's license will be required in your host country or in neighboring countries you may visit. Such licenses are available through an office of the American Automobile Association (AAA).

If you intend to bring along the family pet, it would be wise to not only consult with your sponsor, but also to contact your country's embassy in the United States to ensure that all requirements are met in regard to health certificates and immunizations. Some countries place restrictions on what animals it will allow in-country; exotic birds are not normally allowed in Saudi Arabia. Other countries, such as Turkey, require you to make special provisions in the event the pet should die; you may not be allowed to dispose of it in-country. Other considerations include the availability of food, veterinary care, and boarding facilities. In some countries, pets are considered a luxury few can afford; in others, some animals we consider to be pets, local custom and need look upon as food. Be aware of these cultural differences.

Your transportation office will also assist you in obtaining passports and visas for your country. It is the policy of the Department of State that all military personnel, non-local hire DoD

---

civilians, and their family members assigned to a security assistance organization (SAO) are authorized Diplomatic Passports.

Passport applications (DD Form 1056) should reflect the SAO and U.S. Embassy as the gaining organization in Block 12 and "Diplomatic Passport Required" in Block 17. Since May, 1986, all security assistance personnel and their families have been authorized to receive diplomatic passports. Visa requirements are identified in the U.S. Air Force Foreign Clearance Guide. Additionally, the TMO will help you in airline ticketing and in meeting any special travel requirements of your gaining command, such as the authorization to spend one night enroute to the final destination if a certain number of time zones are crossed, or the authorization to fly a non-U.S. flag carrier based on your mission-essentiality and time constraints of travel.

Health care is also a major concern, especially for remote areas and small organizations. Medical support ranges from large, fully-equipped U.S. hospitals, to small clinics, to the use of host country medical facilities. Most U.S. embassies have a resident nurse, and contract with local doctors to provide limited coverage. In some instances, the Unified Command has members of its Surgeon General Office visit remote locations on a periodic basis. Additionally, your sponsor can tell you about the availability of the Overseas CHAMPUS program in your country. Long-term or special medical requirements should be surfaced immediately to determine if medical care is available in your country. In some countries, adequate pre-natal care is not available and medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) to the largest and closest U.S. medical facility may be authorized. If possible, you and your family members should get a complete physical examination prior to departure to ensure there are no hidden medical problems. This includes getting all dental work completed. Additionally, ensure your immunizations and shot record cards are up-to-date. Your sponsor can tell you if there are any special shots required. For instance, for all personnel going to Saudi Arabia at this time, there is an added requirement to ensure that you have a current (within two years) meningitis vaccination.

Dependent schools vary from country to country, with some having Department of Defense Dependent Schools, others having DoDDS-certified international schools, and some having none whatsoever. In countries where there are no schools available, attendance at DoDDS boarding schools is authorized. Saudi Arabia does not have facilities available for those students in grades 10-12. Consequently, apart from boarding school in either Bahrain or London, the only other option is attendance at a stateside high school. Be sure to include all dependent children on your orders, even if they are remaining in the U.S. as college students or with family or close friends to attend high school. This will allow you to take advantage of the dependent student travel program. By having them on your orders, it will also facilitate their obtaining the proper passport and visa to travel to the country. Planning ahead in this area is a must to avoid a painful or inconvenient family separation. Additionally, some countries do not have the facilities to accommodate special education students with learning disabilities.

Other quality of life issues which help make adjustment easier include living conditions, the host country nationals' views toward Americans, and the size and type of support within the American community. When talking about the living conditions in a country, there are any number of questions you might ask. Is the water potable? How often are there electrical brown-outs? Do the locals like Americans? Can I have a maid or houseboy? What is the cost of living? Can I travel around the country easily? These questions and others like them can be answered by your sponsor or the Community Liaison Office (CLO) in the U.S. Embassy. The CLO can also provide information on the size of the U.S. community, what activities are available, and who to contact.

Commissary and exchange services vary greatly between countries, from full service and all the modern conveniences of home, to extremely limited service with only essential items available. Countries with no commissary/exchange may have a small, cooperative store in the U.S. Embassy

---

for members only who pay a membership fee and share in the cost of procuring items through State Department channels. In some remote countries, assigned personnel are authorized to send with their household goods a special shipment of non-perishable consumable items not available in-country through any other means. If you fall into this category, your TMO and sponsor can help you make arrangements for what to include in this special shipment.

One final topic for consideration is the mail. This is traditionally one of the most discussed and contentious areas of concern to people living outside of the continental U.S. Common complaints center on the time it takes mail to get from the U.S. to your country and back again. Not only can it have an impact on morale, but it can also have a direct effect on your checkbook. Due to the turnaround time, paying bills can sometimes be a headache. Be sure to let your creditors know well in advance of your departure that you are moving to a foreign country and that mail delays are inevitable and commonplace. Oftentimes, arrangements can be made with your credit card companies to adjust billings and late fees to your benefit. Just give them plenty of advanced notice and time to reprogram their computers!

You should also understand that not every country has APO/FPO service. Some countries receive mail service through the U.S. State Department diplomatic pouch. In these instances, restrictions are placed on the size of packages accepted for delivery, both in-coming and out-going. In countries where American or comparable products are not readily available, mail ordering through numerous catalogs (Sears, JC Penney's, L.L. Bean, etc.) becomes a way of life. Subscribe early to ensure your catalogs are ready and waiting for your first order! One final point addresses host country restrictions placed on the mail, i.e., customs regulations. Many Middle Eastern countries have long lists of contraband items: pornography (from Playboy to Cosmopolitan magazines), alcohol (to include cordial liqueur candies), weapons and ammunition, to name but a few. In countries where these restrictions apply, it is important to comply with the system; do not ship contraband items in your household goods or through the mail. If caught, you could be fined by the country and be subject to charges under the UCMJ as well. This also applies to well-meaning friends who try to "do you a favor." Tell your friends and family not to send you contraband items, even as a joke. Some foreign nationals neither understand nor appreciate American humor!

These are just a few areas for consideration in preparing for an overseas assignment; it is not all inclusive. The intent of this short article was to give you an introduction to some of the more critical areas of concern and how you might handle them. The better you prepare for the assignment, the smoother the transition will be from *you're* to *we're*. Living overseas is a challenge, but it can also be an adventure and a truly rewarding educational opportunity for the whole family. See you in Bandaria!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LTC Gendrolis is the Director of Middle East Studies at DISAM and is a Turkish and Arabic Middle East Foreign Area Officer. He and his family have successfully survived four overseas tours in Turkey, Belgium and Saudi Arabia, and look forward to their next adventure.