# Prologue

LATE ON A DRY DUSTY OCTOBER AFTERNOON, THE Marines of 4th CAG (civil affairs group)[1] came to a slight rise on the Somali plains. For the past six months the company had been conducting civil affairs and humanitarian aid operations across the Horn of Africa (HOA)—building schools, clinics, wells, and roads and inoculating animals—in order to foster economic and political stability in the region. Their task had been anything but simple: as part of a HOA Joint Task Force, a total of forty-five civil affairs Marines, along with a handful of engineers, medics, and veterinarians, were expected to cover an area almost two-thirds the size of the continental United States in a region of hundreds of different languages, cultures, and warring ethnic groups.

On the other side of the rise they could see the village of Mahmadiyya. The agriculturally based settlement had been suffering a drought for the past five years. In writing his after action report about the operation, the task force commander Colonel Franklin (pseudonym) described the village's poverty-stricken situation, "The only source of water [was] a stinkin' muddy river, full of crocodiles and filth, about two miles from the people." The unit's first response was, as the commander noted, "to get the well drillers in there, go down about 600' and provide free water to all who wanted it."

Colonel Franklin quickly realized, however, that this was a "bad move. About 10 percent of the population makes their meager living hauling water

from the muddy river." Building a well, he observed, would only result in "instant unemployment and resentment. So what to do?"

I look at the U.S. Marine, Army, Navy, Air Force, and international military officers in my Operational Culture class at Marine Corps University. We are using a real case study to think through the challenges of applying cultural understanding to improve military operations. "What would you do?" I ask, challenging the students to think through the problem from the colonel's perspective.

The students hesitate for a moment. So I lead the discussion by reading the conclusion of Colonel Franklin's after action report describing the Marines' operations in Mahmadiyya: "Restraint. We let the people keep using the bad water, even though we knew we could do better, because the cure will be worse than the disease."

"Was this the only solution?" I toss the question back to the majors and lieutenant colonels in the seminar. Given the extensive deployment experience of most of these master's degree candidates, I anticipate there will be some lively debate here. Some think the colonel made the only reasonable decision. If the purpose of the civil affairs group was to foster greater stability in the region, then increasing unemployment certainly was not a good move.

"Maybe the unit could have hired the water carriers to build the well," suggested a Marine lieutenant colonel. "That would only be a temporary fix," noted his Navy colleague across the table. "Perhaps the unit could have come up with a jobs program for them," added another student. "But we're not in the job creation business," argued the major across from him. "That's what AID [U.S Agency for International Development] and the NGOs [non-governmental organizations] are there for."

"Sure," an Army ranger noted dryly. "How many NGOs do you see running around the field when the bullets are flying? We're the ones stuck with the job, whether we like it or not."

There is silence in the room as the officers all think back to the frustrating, seemingly insolvable cultural and human problems they faced in their last deployments—the daily expanding expectations of the U.S. public and government that the Marine Corps and its sister services were responsible not only for conducting wars but also for solving all the problems of broken countries, from building wells to creating stable governments.

Suddenly, a hand shoots up. "Ma'am, maybe they could build the well, but put it a mile or so from the village, closer to the river." The officers in the

classroom look at him, not quite convinced. "That way the people in the village could get clean water," continued the student, a Marine major and engineer who had recently returned from deployment to Afghanistan. "They wouldn't get eaten by crocodiles. And the water carriers would still have a job."

The officers are intrigued. The solution seems inefficient to time-obsessed American eyes. And yet despite its unconventional and indirect method, from the point of view of the Somali villagers, the solution would in fact give them water without disrupting their economy.

This book is about cross-cultural problem solving—about the messy process of translation, interpretation, and program implementation as two different worlds struggle to make sense of each other. The focus is not upon the answer, but the process. *Culture in Conflict* focuses on what happens to a policy or program, created in Washington, D.C., based on assumed "American" ways of looking at the world, when it is applied to another culture, to people who look at the problem differently based on another set of assumptions and concerns.

What follows is the story of how the Marine Corps—a unique military organization with its own cultural ideals, identity, structure, and ways of conducting business—made sense of a strange "foreign" Washington imperative to conduct culturally effective wars. It is a narrative of the unexpected, sometimes paradoxical solutions that occur when two cultures (even two "American" cultures) collide. And why sometimes "building a well a mile from the village," although inefficient, is actually the most effective way to accomplish the mission.