
An American librarian in the Middle East

By Thomas Cetwinski

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The challenges faced by a library consultant to the Royal Saudi Naval Forces.

In January 1972 an agreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia created the Saudi Naval Expansion Program (SNEP). The objective of SNEP was to assist the Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF) in the establishment of naval bases at Jiddha on the Red Sea, Jubail on the Persian Gulf, with headquarters at Riyadh, the capital. The program envisioned the construction and delivery of various classes of oceangoing vessels as well as smaller craft. Construction of the naval bases began in Saudi Arabia in the late 1970s with actual implementation in September 1979.

A Naval Forces School was established at Jubail to provide the RSNF with skilled technicians and officer personnel to direct, operate, maintain, and support naval ship and required shore activities. Four separate but related schools met this objective: a Naval Specialization School, a Technical Specialization School, a Combat Training School, and a Naval Tactical School.

In January 1980 I accepted the position of librarian for the Naval Forces School with Telemedia, a consulting firm in Chicago. Telemedia shared the responsibilities of implementing a training program with several U.S. companies in Jubail, and the library was one of their direct concerns.

The challenge

The personal living adjustments for an American in Saudi Arabia are challenging, to say the least. Temperatures reaching 125 degrees with 97% humidity and summer sand storms displaced any lingering romantic notions of the desert. The success of our stay in Saudi Arabia was also predetermined by an ability to merge professional concepts of time, quality, scheduling, and cost with local practices common to Middle Eastern business transactions. What was lacking in climate and living conditions, however, was compensated for by the Saudis themselves. Our students and officers were cooperative and eager to learn. Their desire to adopt and implement U.S. standards and specifications was encouraging and a constant source of motivation.

The professional challenge presented was particularly enlightening in two personal respects. The first was that in practicing librarianship you are always able to rely on professional colleagues for advice through formal or informal discussion. If you have a particular idea or problem you can also conduct a literature search resulting in shared experiences. But in a remote fishing village of only several

hundred population on the Persian Gulf all you are left with is your imagination.

This leads to my second point. There has always been much discussion within the profession concerning our "transferable skills." I have often been an outspoken proponent of librarianship's flexibility in this regard. It was not until recently, however, that I realized my ignorance or naivete about what exactly that meant. Here I was a librarian with an undergraduate degree in the humanities and graduate courses in administration and management of academic and special libraries, on a military compound in the desert, handling technical material pertaining to sophisticated electronic equipment without an initial staff or an issue of *Library Literature* in sight.

After first panicking I realized that the packaging and dissemination of information is, in fact, a transferable skill; and that the bringing together of specific information and patron requirements is not necessarily brought about by subject expertise, but rather understanding search strategies and information organization. The subject expertise was present in my engineering and military colleagues at the worksite. I needed to draw from my knowledge and experience in conducting appropriate reference interviews to determine the nature of the literature leading toward the identification of specific information requirements. Of particular value was the professional respect shared on the project and our willingness to cooperate in reaching common educational objectives.

By the time our contract reached its conclusion a super-highway between Jubail and Dhahran replaced the existing primitive road. This increased our accessibility to the airport and a large city. Along with that milestone came the availability of resources at the University of Petroleum and Minerals, convenient international telephone and telex service, and a Safeway supermarket.

The library

The library at the Naval Forces School had to combine the best elements of an engineering and an academic library to offer independent research capability for all concerned. A collection of approximately 6,000 titles with a maximum growth of 12,000 had to be cataloged and classified in a manner in which the student, instructor, and engineer could make effective use of the collection. It was the library's objective that a patron be able to search the card catalog, retrieve a document, and accomplish a task independent of a librarian's assistance.

All library material was in English. The first students acquired their technical knowledge and English language ability at schools in the United States. Subsequent students, however, would not have the U.S. experience. Therefore the primary concern in developing library services was the student's ability to comprehend directions and concepts presented in English.

One central library with three satellite libraries had been planned for the school. The satellite libraries were in different facilities, the distance from the main library being such that it required documentation readily available for the daily operation and training on equipment. Other than technical and support documentation the central library was designed to house a general college level

On a military compound in the desert, without staff or a copy of Library Lit in sight.

reading collection, selected microform material, and a walk-in vault in order that required classified material could be properly housed and controlled.

The collection consisted of technical documents, support material for research and development, a general reference section, school archives, and curricula master reproducibles.

Training devices in the school were actual shipboard equipment. As a training device was delivered to the school, the accompanying documentation fell into three categories: technical manuals which were primarily shipboard applicable, curriculum for operation and maintenance training, and manufacturer's manuals. It was the library's initial responsibility to verify contract deliverables, identify discrepancies, distribute material, and maintain master copies. Other responsibilities included appropriate managerial tasks: reports, planning, evaluations, administrative duties, committee assignments, etc. The most challenging aspects of the work of the librarian, however, were those areas requiring a comprehensive knowledge of librarianship and a familiarity with educational environments.

There were plans for the eventual introduction of an automated cataloging system which would bring together all document repositories of the Royal Saudi Navy in Saudi Arabia and abroad. The initial logistical problems of the remote site, however, precluded such plans. A manual system would have to be implemented and maintained for approximately five years.

Publications arriving were placed in one of two categories by the NFS library staff: "training" materials or "technical" documents.

Training materials were contractor furnished commercial publications in support of the training effort. These materials were added to the collection using the LC cataloging and classification system. They represented approximately 10% of the collection and were processed using cataloging-in-print data.

Technical documents were government or man-

ufacturer's published material and accounted for 90% of the collection. After initial contract deliverables were accomplished these percentages would eventually reverse themselves.

Documents published specifically for the Saudi Naval Expansion Program were assigned an RSN (Royal Saudi Navy) cataloging and classification number. This identification number consisted of a five-digit code indicating a general commodity or subject matter. It was followed by a chronological three-digit serial number and a three-letter code indicating document type. For example, RSN-09234-001-TMM began with the country code, Royal Saudi Navy; followed by a subject identifier 09234, gas turbines; a chronological serial number, 001; and a document type, TMM, technical manual.

The NFS Library created an in-house subject classification to be added to LC subject headings which responded to ship applicability and equipment nomenclature unique to the training activity. It was therefore the cataloging librarian's responsibility to implement a subject classification that might meet the requirements of a reference interview. For such a specialized task it was important that the librarians become familiar with the methodology peculiar to naval documents.

The student, for example, might request documentation on specific shipboard equipment by its common military acronym. If a student requested information on the KSR or the TTY sets, the tech-

nical librarian would begin the search with the student by keywords, or in this case key letters. Under KSR there would be a see reference card to the entry "teletypewriter sets."

The card catalog was divided into two parts. First, there was a standard shelflist of all documents held by the library in call number order, reflecting shelf location; it also functioned as an inventory record. Second, there was the traditional author/title/subject card catalog in dictionary format.

Students were trained in the proper use of the library by a series of printed handouts dealing with various policies and procedures. These were simple, direct, to-the-point instructions, since English was their second language. These were more successful than an all-inclusive, widely distributed "user's guide." Guides were usually not read and often misplaced, since they offered too much information at one time.

Each student was part of a continuing English language course. Library instruction was included as part of the course. This one-hour session encouraged library use. It was particularly successful in bringing to the student's attention the wide variety of ways in which information is packaged as well as in introducing the library staff. Discussion on dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, and other reference publications encouraged a sense of curiosity. Publications for which a cursory knowledge existed then functioned as a secure base to more

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specialized document searches required in the operation and maintenance of sophisticated equipment. The objective was to break down the intimidating barriers often found in libraries in the Middle East.

It was not long before students realized that identifying an information need and articulating that need led to a positive resolution—whether it was the correct usage of a word or a complicated schematic.

This introduction to basic reference publications, combined with a working knowledge of the card catalog, made it possible in time for the student to identify an information need, search the card catalog, identify a source, and locate information required independent of librarian assistance. Our objective had been reached.

Many practices of the Naval Forces School Li-

brary at Jubail were unconventional by U.S. standards. It was, however, a unique environment with particular requirements. Regretfully our contract had concluded while on the threshold of the next and final phase of academic library development. The library was about to go to an online system with the ability to interface with other RSNF libraries. A new academic building had been completed, ten thousand volumes had been identified and ordered, and the curricula began to indicate a move from equipment-oriented training to a more traditional college engineering program.

Editor's Note: The author is currently working with Telemedia in Cairo to consult on the development of a library for the Egyptian Air Force Academy to support a bachelor of science degree in aeronautical engineering and computer science. ■■

Deacidification dialogue

By Peter G. Sparks

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and Richard D. Smith

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Further discussion on mass deacidification processes stimulated by Richard Smith's article in the December C&RL News.

Editor's Note: Peter Sparks at the Library of Congress was asked to comment on "Mass deacidification: The Wei T'o way" in the December issue, pp. 588-593. Following his remarks are comments by author Richard Smith.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the article by Richard Smith of Wei T'o Associates. A short response is not adequate for extensive dis-

cussion of the technical claims in Richard Smith's article. However, the position of the Library of Congress Preservation Office on several issues and its own process needs to be stated.

Dr. Smith appears to view other mass deacidification processes to be competitive with his own. The Library of Congress Preservation Office does not share that view. We believe that the processes presently available or under development present reasonable alternatives, from which an institution