

# SPECIAL OPERATIONS

# IN AFRICA

BY JANICE BURTON

“Niger is a very poor country. The people there have very little. They expect very little.

One day, I was out and I saw a little boy walking down the street. He was completely naked. But he had on a pair of shoes. You could tell the shoes came out of a box that a church or charity had sent. They were about two sizes too big for him. So I stopped our vehicle — tried out my French — and asked him about his shoes. He told me that he was very happy to have shoes, even though they were too big. Something about this kid got to me. So we took him with us into the village, and I went into a store and bought him a shirt and a pair of shorts. They were also too big for him. He got cleaned up and put on the clothes and I let him look in a mirror. He smiled, really big. He kept telling me thank you and how rich he felt. I had spent about \$2 and to him, it changed his life.

I look at these countries from Libya to Mali to Niger and hope that this little boy — and others like him — who was so happy with his shirt and shoes can grow up in a country that is more safe and stable. If our special-operations forces have something to do with that, than I can go to my retirement a happy man.”

— Col. George Bristol  
Commander, JSOTF-Trans Sahara

Col. George Bristol, a U.S. Marine with more than 37 years in the Corps and now the commander of the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Trans Sahara, has spent a great deal of his time in the Corps working in special operations, and in particular, working in Africa.

“U.S. special-operations forces are without peer in their ability to look at, and operate in, a complex environment like Africa,” said Bristol, during a recent interview at the TSOC headquarters at Kelley Barracks, Vaihingen, Germany. “Africa is the true next horizon. We are working successfully in an interagency world in a vast, multilingual, multi-cultural area that has an operational area far bigger than the United States.

“When people ask me about Africa, my answer is simple. Africa is a very violent place. It is a very poor place. It’s a place where many nations and entities are vying for its vast store of natural resources. It is a vast region of ungoverned space with harsh terrain,” he continued.

Along with its rugged terrain, its people also fiercely hold on to tribal traditions, which put survival via competition — whether it’s for land, water or fuel — as a top priority. In today’s environment, there is a nexus where all things converge: the exchange of goods.

“Smuggling is considered an honest profession and illicit goods, drugs and weapons are coin of the realm,” said Bristol.

As is instability, which is caused by the former, and frequent changes in governance. In West Africa alone, more than 40 coups have occurred in the past 60 years.<sup>1</sup> In April 2012, coups in Guinea-Bissau and Mali made headlines and in late December 2012, the U.S. State Department closed its embassy and evacuated all U.S. dignitaries in the Central African Republic as rebel forces converged on the capital. The CAR has been a significant partner to the United States in its work to bring stability to Central Africa through Operation Observant Compass, which is aimed at defeating the Lord’s Resistance Army.

At the heart of these coups is a lack of stability in the region. Felicity Duncan, writing on Money Web, explains that instability can be contagious and can spread like wildfire through a region pointing to the recent experience in Mali and Guinea Bissau.

It is that kind of instability and regional chaos that U.S. special-operations forces on the continent are trying to end through two key means of operations: building partner-nation capacity and countering violent extremist organizations. It is hoped that by providing



*Photo by U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Dawn M. Price*



**CATTLE CALL** A village boy works his cattle. Special-operations forces sometimes rely on local villagers to help meet their needs for food. *Photo by U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Dawn M. Price*

stability in one country it can influence adjacent countries, just as the activities of the VEOs spill over and cause instability.

“We know that our African partners are looking to counter the VEO threats out there. They don’t want them spilling over from one country to another. We are working in the interagency and with our country teams to ensure that we can help promote stability in the region,” said Col. Ken Sipperly, deputy operations officer, U.S. Special Operations Command-Africa.

“Most of the countries we work with do not have a large annual budget for their military. Unlike the United States, they do not have the assets or equipment they need to protect their borders. What they do have is a strong desire for stability, control and protection. They have a desire to bring their borders closer together to make blockades so that threat groups cannot compromise them,” continued Sipperly. “Most importantly, they have a desire to protect themselves and their families.”

It is that desire, coupled with commitment, that has built and nurtured long-term relationships between U.S. SOF and many partner-nation militaries on the continent. While the U.S. presence in Africa is not huge, it definitely has an impact.

“We have a relatively small force to conduct a mission in an area the size of the continental United States,” said Lt. Col. Keith Dunkle, JSOTF-TS operations officer. “We have a small element operating in an area of significant threats in Northwest Africa. It is really like playing Whack-A-Mole. One threat pops up and we address it and then we move on to the next. We want to apply equal pressure to these threats by providing training to their armed forces.

“We do not have a large footprint. It is seamless, small and discreet,” said Dunkle. “The need for this kind of force precludes the use of conventional forces — not because there isn’t work to be done — but because their footprint is too large for a country team to support.”

He noted that the addition of forces in African countries is considered an “emotional event” by the host nation, which has to justify the presence of U.S. forces not only to its citizens but also to its neighbors.

In Northwest Africa there are three significant threats to the stability of the region: al-Qaeda in Libya; al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb operating in Mali; and Boko Haram operating in Niger. These threats have the ability to spread throughout the region, ARSOF working indirectly with host-nation militaries will attempt to stem the tide.

In these areas, the U.S. Special Operations Command-Africa brings all of its resources to bear. Specifically for Army SOF, the three main units of action the Civil Military Support Element, Regional Information Support Team and Special Forces operational detachments. Working under the auspices of the Department of State and the U.S. Embassy Country Teams, the units work closely with partner-nation forces, getting the biggest bang for their buck from Joint Combined Exchange Training and serving as advisers to counterterrorism units.

“We are truly working in the interagency in Africa and the partnerships that are emerging are very exciting,” said Bristol. “The last few months have been a time of great tension. The agility, innovative nature and high standard of excellence, all of which are hallmarks of SOF, have been put to the test — including our situational awareness. We have had to put the full range of SOF skills into play in extreme operating environments in support of the interagency, and we have found that our ability to do these tasks are alive and well.”

A key element of SOF’s presence in Africa is in engagement and shaping of the environment. “We have stayed the course as an organization and that enables the host-nation SOF through training engagement to secure their borders and build their skill sets,” said Sipperly. “It is important to remember that this is not an OEF or OIF environment. It is a very lethal environment and we are here to enable the host nation to support themselves, but in doing so, we are protecting U.S. interests in the region.”

The U.S. mission in Africa is definitely not a lethal one. Rather it is one of long-term relationship building, shoring up capability and helping partner nations solve their own problems.

One of the biggest challenges for SOF operating in Africa is space. Africa is an enormous continent and the tyranny of distance often works against the force. ODAs that operate far in the hinterlands must be able to sustain their operations over a long period of time. A lack of landing strips and roads makes resupply difficult in the best of conditions. Teams go into forward operating areas knowing they need to be able to take care of their own needs from provisions to medical care. Often they rely on local villagers to help meet needs when it comes to food. Teams purchase game from the villagers, which provides them with food and promotes good will among the people they need to live among.

One member of an ODA from the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) explained that the quality of food they purchase varies. On one occasion, the villagers brought an animal to the team that the team could not identify. They asked the villagers what type of animal it was. Unable to explain, the villager went back to his hut and brought the head of the animal to the team. It was an aardvark. “It didn’t taste like chicken,” quipped a team member.

“It’s also a given that you are going to lose weight and get sick,” said the team medic. “We prepare for that and make the best of the situation. In these areas, we have to be very careful about any injuries we get because they are going to get infected.”

With the sheer size of the continent, the force finds more work than it can handle because of the limited forces available for employment in the region. SOF are called upon to handle spots that are in critical nodes, which stops problems before they spread throughout the region.

Another major challenge is that of competition for natural resources on the continent. While SOF is working to build the capability of the government to sustain itself, some countries are taking advantage of their instability and pour money in to develop the resources rather than the people. It is imperative that a balance in the flow of money is found.

All of these issues add to the complexity of the situation in Africa. These outside elements often dictate how SOF will approach a host-nation and what kind of help it can offer. Part of a traditional foreign internal defense mission is advising the host nation on how to do things. It is imperative that SOF utilize their cultural knowledge of the region when offering suggestions or advice. Nothing can be done in a vacuum. SOF in Africa take a holistic view when addressing the challenges faced by their counterparts. In Africa, one size does not fit all.

One mission that has garnered widespread attention is the participation of U.S. advisers in *Observant Compass*. The mission of *Observant Compass* is to remove the threat of the Lord’s Resistance Army from

U.S. doesn’t use its full range of technology to hunt him down.

“Over time, it could become a problem for them,” he noted. “They don’t understand the constraints under which the Soldiers are operating.”

He noted that the relationship between the advisers and the DoS is particularly strong and continues to grow as they engage in missions like *Observant Compass*. While many will argue that driving Kony out of his normal area of operations equals a success, the actual end state of the mission according to those executing it is the “creation of a fully enabled force that is capable of prosecuting the mission on their own to bring Kony to justice or to marginalize the LRA until it no longer poses a threat to the region.”

One way of doing that is by applying constant pressure on drivers of instability; not only through specific named operations, but also through ongoing training missions and exercises. One of the several USAFRI-COM exercises held annually on the continent is *Operation Flintlock* slated for the spring and will be held in Mauritania. The exercise involves the militaries of several partner nations as well as members of NATO. During the exercise, forces are taught and tested on medical operations, infantry and peacekeeping skills, airborne operations, humanitarian relief and leadership skills.

Throughout the course of the year, the U.S. helps sponsor five other exercises which are aimed at different problem sets. While *Flintlock* is very focused on counterterrorism, *Exercise Epic Guardian* is more scenario driven, integrates host-nation crisis responses with SOF employment. Integration is key because it gives the force

“When they see one American Soldier, they think their prayers are answered and their problems are solved. To them, American Soldiers represent safety and security.”

a four-country region. Led by Joseph Kony, the LRA has terrorized the people of South Sudan, Uganda, Central Africa Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Counter-LRA mission includes training, funding, airlift, logistics, communications and intelligence support, which brings intelligence to bear on the conduct of missions.

In late October 2011, President Barak Obama authorized the deployment of 100 Special Forces advisers to the region, not to engage the LRA, but rather to train the military forces in the region. Working hand-in-hand with the Department of State’s representative for LRA issues, the U.S. advisers were welcomed by the military forces in the region.

The DoS representative was operating in the region prior to the deployment of U.S. forces. He noted that the presence of U.S. forces was welcomed by the soldiers and the local citizenry.

He explained that even in the most remote areas of the region the villagers are aware of what is going on around the world, noting that they knew when the U.S. raid resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden. The representative added that while the presence of nongovernmental agencies and other governmental agencies like the Department of State are welcome, it is the American Soldier who draws the most attention.

“There is something about the uniform,” he said. “When they see one American Soldier, they think their prayers are answered and their problems are solved. To them, American Soldiers represent safety and security.”

At times, that can serve as a double-edged sword, as in the mission to find and capture Kony. Local villagers don’t understand why the

the opportunity to conduct operations in different places and to work with their neighboring forces.

*Silent/Noble Warrior* is focused on the country’s SOF capacity and is regionally focused. This is the exercise where African partner nations take the lead.

In all of its missions, SOF works diligently to plug into episodic engagements that are already occurring. While many see the way forward as “fixing the problem,” forces operating in Africa understand that it is not their job to fix the problem, rather it is their job to help identify the problem, introduce resources and training where necessary and serve as a bridge to allow the host nation to negotiate the terrain to build a more stable country and region. The objective is a self-sustaining Africa that is stable and inhospitable to VEOs and their ideology. Special-operations forces operating under the auspices of SOCAFRICA have embraced an African proverb as their means of operating: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. **SW**



comment here

## Notes

1. Hudson, John, “Why Are There So Many Coups in West Africa?” *The Atlantic Wire*, retrieved Dec. 28, 2012, [www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2012/04/why-are-there-so-many-coups-west-africa/5125](http://www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2012/04/why-are-there-so-many-coups-west-africa/5125).

*Janice Burton is the editor of Special Warfare.*