



## OPERATIONAL CULTURE IN AN OPEN, PERMISSIVE ENVIRONMENT

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### Airfield Operations Observations from Exercise Flintlock

BY CAPTAIN CALEB SLAYTON

#### TASK VERSES THE GREATER MISSION

You're a SOF operator, collaborating in an exercise or sustainment environment with 10 other African partners and just as many non-African partners. You have one central bed-down location but your daily sorties take you to 10 other airfields in several separate Sahelian countries. Your daily mission is anything from airlift to airdrops to airfield surveys and area reconnaissance; moving equipment, emplacing personnel, training host-nation partners and supporting exercise and real-world missions. Let me suggest this to you: the expanded list of "missions" should be recognized merely as small "tasks" serving greater strategic objectives. Your greater SOF mission exceeds route planning and tactical savvy. The Special Operations Command-Africa mission, an integral part of the U.S. Africa Command mission, is to build long-term partnerships, enabling honest rapport while sharing military expertise and effort toward common interests and against mutual threats.

The seasoned aircraft operator catalogues every contingency, preparing for every tactical maneuver or possible austere landing scenario. What are the physical conditions of the landing zone and the aircraft? What are the threat trends and the acceptable levels of risk? Where do I refuel? What are the airspace restrictions? The operator has thought out the "mission," but has yet to address the greatest objective. The real mission is long-term and involves an understanding of operational culture. What are the language challenges? What is the cultural concept of time? What is the proper method of displaying respect in official and unofficial engagements? What are the host-nation operational rules; written and unwritten? How does one respect the airspace of a sovereign nation aside from the manuals tucked in the flight bag or saved to the iPad? These are the challenges to SOF operations in Sub-Saharan Africa and they hold the key to mission and strategic success in the long term.

#### CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE IMPACTS OPERATIONS

Many of the following observations come from Flintlock exercises hosted in Niger and Chad, but including participants and observers from Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Algeria, Cameroon, Morocco, Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and nearly two dozen other African and Western partner nations. Flintlock is a yearly counterterrorism capacity-building exercise

focused on building partner-nation military capabilities through austere training and sharing of information. The end goal is to leave African militaries more capable in addressing regional threats like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram and the Movement for Unity and Justice in West Africa. Flintlock is crucial not only to building military skills but also focusing on population-centric strategies. Violent extremist groups will not be defeated through military action alone, but through the combined front of a united military-civilian social offensive garnering mutual respect.

There are two huge challenges to addressing operational culture; time and time. The first “time” is pre-deployment preparation. Only a handful of operators are able to dedicate sufficient time to learning local language customs and greetings. It takes time to research the current events, history and most important of all, the host-nation perspective of the cultural touchstones. The answers are not found in intelligence threat data and analysis. In fact, too much threat data can easily obscure the operational mission; overemphasizing hurdles and ignoring cultural bridges. The second “time” challenge occurs during the operation itself. Is there time planned into the schedule for host-nation relationship building, air traffic control coordination, host-base rapport-building investments and contingency contract negotiations?

Exercises like Flintlock take a lot of planning and coordination. Through dozens of host-nation meetings and engagements, contracts are signed and agreements solidified to address all the potential needs of players involved. A lot of hard work goes in to scouring over past after action reports and building on the expertise of all nations involved. These are all political transactions that can look good on paper but are not able to completely foresee how future events will unfold. The weather never cooperates. Information does not flow out of meetings into the field as planners might expect either. One air traffic control team receiving all the non-standard flight plan specifics may pass the file to the next shift without more than a high five for a changeover. Planning is important, but it is in the contingency realm where operators prove their worth.

Operators all too often can meet their task but with the greater mission left to the wayside. In the Sahel, and much of Africa, it’s not that time is relative; the truth is that relationship is of utmost importance. Your schedule must be padded to include greetings with chauffeurs, fuel services, the hangar manager, base ops and the unexpected host-nation two-minute salutation. Western culture is task oriented. As such, your host-country Special Operations Liaison Element or Defense Attaché expect direct questions and will provide prompt execution without “unnecessary” rapport building. However, considering the high-rate of foreign military personnel turnover, it is not unreasonable for a host-nation partner to desire to understand a military counterpart.

Be careful, however, to make rapport-building a genuine effort. The Continent of Africa knows all too well what insincere relationship efforts look and feel like. During the Colonial era, empires, merchants and militaries took advantage of Africa’s trust and generosity and gave little back in return. Political strategists also took advantage of Africa’s internal tensions, playing upon ethnic rivalries while simultaneously accentuating tribal identities. The colonizers signed legitimate treaties with numerous African leaders. However as a secondary and tertiary strategy some African leaders were strong-armed into agreements or even tricked into signing away land and property, all for the expedient self-interest of the colonizer.<sup>01</sup>

It has been 50 plus years since independence for most of the Continent and many countries are still on the relational mend with their former colonizers. Short-term solutions can be brutal to long-term strategies. The African host-nation will be friendly and generous, but be sure not to take selfish advantage of the gesture. There will be instances when time is short and the task is pressing. Do not be tempted to strong-arm a deal or force what you consider a “logical” agenda. The strong-arm method may work once. Getting red in the face may achieve success the second time, but over the long-term relationships will crack and crumble. The best way to present an offer to

01  
U.S. and Partner nation military forces call for medevac air support during a joint training exercise at Flintlock 2016.

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A Senegalese Solider shakes hands with a Special Forces team member during Flintlock 2016.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY SPC. ANDREA SERHAN



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your African partner is to outline the proposal, provide adequate time and multiple engagements to meet an agreement.

In any open and honest relationship, there must be a steady flow of information. For Flintlock 2014 in Niger, the Niamey military aircraft apron was beyond max capacity. The civilian control tower experienced a 400 percent increase in its airspace activity while adjusting to at least seven different Western Partner aircrews and one new local drop zone. In the indirect manner of Sahelian subtlety, both the Nigerien military base leadership and the ATC asked for more information. They needed to be in the loop on everything, regardless of whether or not they would be in tactical control. For the base commander, it was enough to receive a daily email on the activity, take-off-times, refueling plans and services that would be occurring on *his* ramp. Providing information is a sign of trust and is well worth the time and effort.

The Chadian 2015 context was arguably even more challenging. Through multiple planning conferences, culminating in December 2014, the

aircraft activity appeared at manageable level. The cordial aircraft parking agreements were generous. By February 2015, at the start of the exercise, Chad was at war. Formerly forgotten aircraft were pushed to their limits in coalition efforts against Boko Haram. Every inch of military ramp was focused on real-world coalition operations. Negotiating any aircraft movement for an exercise required sensitivity to daily combat realities. The Chadian hosts proudly carved out limited parking for its exercise partner aircraft while simultaneously loading munitions and down-loading casualties from their own.

The Nigerien Air Force, Police Force and military as a whole were excessively generous and welcoming to U.S. and partner-nation military presence. Due to, and despite, challenges in cross-cultural communication, the Niger military went to great lengths to accommodate the fast-paced, advanced technological level of non-Nigerien methods. What were normally half-day Fridays to accommodate Friday prayers and a longer weekend were swallowed by a seven-day ops tempo normally running well into night-time hours. Where there were normally 18 total officers to run the Niger Air Base activities, there were two, total. The rest were manning exercise out-stations or local exercise command positions. The base manager, a major (O-4) equivalent, stashed a mattress in his office anticipating the late nights and early mornings. SOF operators should think twice before under-estimating host-nation efforts or capabilities. If you get

**WHEN SOF UNITS FOCUS TOO MUCH ON THE "TASK" AND NOT THE "GREATER MISSION" THERE IS OFTEN LITTLE LEARNING PASSED BETWEEN OPERATORS**

frustrated and openly impatient before your African partner, you may be completely missing the great strides taken to meet your standards.

## NO SHORTCUTS ON STANDARDS OR COMMUNICATION

When the SOF operators approached the Nigerien base operations office to approve the first-ever U.S. C-130 Forward Arming and Refueling in Niger, three elements should take priority. One, all paperwork and survey data needed to be completed and signed.<sup>02</sup> Second, as Western military capabilities might be foreign to some African partners, it's courteous to explain in detail tactical procedures. Finally, it is important to think about how the host-nation might perceive the action overall. The Nigeriens were initially offended at the thought that the FARP would replace their huge effort at meeting all the fuel needs. U.S. planners were concerned about technical data; while the host-nation, all ready to approve any and every exercise need, felt slighted fuel would be provided by a more "capable" source. Complete data, information dissemination and understanding the cultural nuances are three elements necessary to display trust and a respect between any two partners. In the end, it was easy to explain the FARP procedures as a win-win to African stakeholders once planners understood their counterpart's point-of-view.

Of the three essential elements, information dissemination may be the most important to SOF operators. The purpose of many SOCAFRICA engagements in Africa is to build host-nation capabilities. When SOF units focus too much on the "task" and not the "greater mission" there is often little learning passed between operators and the African partner. It took time and extra effort to meet with the ATC before completing unfamiliar air drop operations, but it was time well spent. It took one more extra email and perhaps a personal trip to deliver by hand the bed-down, parking and sortie times for the next day's aircraft to the base commander, admittedly overwhelmed by the process. All it takes to ensure mission success is a little tact and patience to ensure host-nation partners buy in to your plan of action.

Overall, the air executions achieved their objectives. Experienced aircrew from multiple units participated in the exercise supported by an air component commander and airfield liaisons. One such example of patient information dissemination leading to long-term success was witnessed at one of the outstations. Dedicated Nigerien personnel staffed the austere airfield. Despite their competence, the staff was unaccustomed to the high ops tempo of a major military exercise. The U.S. air liaison for the exercise took time to build rapport with the Nigerien personnel, sharing ATC responsibilities and allowing for flexibility in exercise hours. It takes a SOF warrior-diplomat to sync the two cultures. Operation-

al culture teaches how to gain exponentially from considering cultural dynamics, putting the mission before the task. Incidentally, language and cultural barriers are a challenge far beyond radio communications on aircraft approach. If it is any consolation to the U.S. pilot, your American accent is very difficult for an African ATC to understand as well.<sup>03</sup>

## NEGOTIATING IS MORE THAN PERSUADING

Most SOF operators in the Sahel will tell you Africans are very forgiving. It is true. It's always easier to negotiate with a friend rather than a stranger. If the environment and mission permit, SOF should make it a priority to meet and greet counterparts. Whether you are landing in N'Djamena, Chad for a 30 minute troop pick-up or building long-term rapport with an austere air field fuel manager, there are three ways to make a quick friend. Have a friendly face meet your host-nation reception before they even have a chance to approach your vehicle or aircraft position. Provide a friendly handshake and a greeting in the local language. In doing so, you transform your intimidating presence into a relationship enabler. You shatter any negative misperception with unexpected kindness and you display a willingness to depart from the shelter of English into the heart language of your newest friend. It is always more difficult to ask a bribe of a friend.

You cannot bank on the fact that a contract or pre-signed agreement has made its way in paper to where you are working. The contingency in this case requires extensive operational cultural insight. In examples from Flintlock, it was enough for local authorities to hear "U.S. Embassy" or "Flintlock Exercise" for them to accommodate your request. This shorthand is testimony to the relationship building

01  
Partner nation forces load onto a helicopter during Flintlock 2016.  
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. ANDREA SERHAN

02  
U.S. Army Special Operations Soldiers meet with partner nation military forces during Flintlock 2016.  
U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO



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prior to the main exercise body arrived. In more dictatorial political environments, a command from the “top” or the proper signature is the only method of assured access. Your interaction sets the tone for every future engagement with an individual or location after you depart. The next C-130 or CV-22 crew interacting with your host-nation contacts will either thank you or “defriend” you based on the relational foundation you’ve engineered.

## COURTEOUS IN EVERY CASE

Despite Status of Forces agreements, contracts and local chauffeurs, there is always the chance of running in to local law enforcement or getting hung up on a local regulation. The stereotype of rampant corruption is not always correct. Whether you are being asked to pay a landing fee or forced to pay a parking ticket, check yourself. One: be as humble and respectful as possible. Using the local equivalent for “please” “thank you” “sir” and “ma’am” is a good start. Two: ask yourself, “What is the rule and did I break it?” There are ways to find the rules, written and unwritten, for every operational context. Combining research with Embassy assistance and a host-nation friend is a good way to figure it out.

**NOTES** 01. M. E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa*, Second ed. (London and New York: Longman, 1999). 02. Waivers can be considered, if necessary, after full disclosure and agreement with the Host Nation. 03. As an added aid and a cultural bridge to the host nation military partner, Flintlock looked for a few call signs in the local language. They were easy for everyone to pronounce and made the host-nation proud. (It’s also easier than having to spell “ANVIL” with the phonetic alphabet every time you address the Control Tower). 04. It was a small shock to many aircrew members to see multiple civilians of all ages with smart phones at even the most remote airfield locations taking pictures and videos of the “curious” events.

SOFA’s do not make military members infallible; but they should make them more humble.

The business approach to any process in the Sahel, from civilian airport security to customs agents to gate guards, often hits a dead end. A familiar face holds more credibility than a badge or military rank. Keeping to the rules is always the first step. But when the rules are unwritten or unclear, it was the familiar face that could guide unfamiliar exercise participants and unprepared journalists through the maze of would-be hassles and confiscations.

It takes more energy and preparation to be a warrior-diplomat than a tactical savant. Host nation military and civilian authorities will respect you for making an effort to honor and respect their position. To fully complete your mission, be prepared to leave a small token of thanks with your newest African partners (and hopefully life-long friend). Something as simple as a t-shirt, unit coin or trinket is an acceptable gift. Even though smart-phones and camera-phones are widespread, printed pictures are still harder to come by and are a cherished gift for African partners to put in their home or office.<sup>04</sup> The best gifts are practical or showcase a unique find in the heart of the Sahel. Presentation is everything. Make the occasion as friendly yet formal as possible. Some enduring mission sets in Africa have navigated the local artisan markets and crafted gifts to include local wares. As a bonus, these types of innovative gifts contribute to the local economy and materially illustrate your interest in local customs and culture.

In a military so concerned with the number of sorties, PAX, cargo movements and extremist networks dismantled, it’s a difficult adjustment to quantify relationship building, information dissemination and genuinely mutual education. However, investing in relationships and moving forward together with African partners will ensure tactical and strategic mission success. 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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A U.S. Army Special Operations Soldier talks with an African partner nation Soldier during Flintlock 2016. Relationship building is one of the primary goals of joint military training exercises. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

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A 3rd SFG(A) 18D teaches a combat lifesaver course during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. ZAYID BALLESTEROS