

# Return to AFRICA

## Lessons Learned from the 3rd Special Forces Group's Return to Africa

BY MAJOR ALEXANDER B. LAZATIN

In the Spring of 2015, members of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) transitioned from support to Operation Enduring Freedom to Resolute Support in Afghanistan. Upon arrival back home to Fort Bragg, the men of Co. A., 3rd Bn., 3rd SFG(A), received the order that the unit was transitioning back to Africa as the regionally aligned force responsible for operations on the Continent in support of security and national interests.

Having spent the past 14 years fighting in Afghanistan, there were different reactions among the force. Although, several questions surfaced within the company concerning the transition, three questions were the most frequently asked. First, what type of missions was anticipated in the new area of responsibility? Second, what are the threats, and finally, how capable are the African partner nations in deterring threats? Some of those questions were answered during the company's participation in Flintlock 2016; however, continued exposure to the Continent will grow the group's understanding of the complexity of operating in Africa.

### FLINTLOCK: THE BEGINNING

In September 2015, the company was tasked to participate in Flintlock, providing an Advanced Operational Base and four operational detachment-alphas. Although, the preparation and planning for the exercise was already well underway prior to the official tasking, the company took ownership of the mission. The company transitioned to the role of AOB 3310 during planning, preparation and execution. Because Flintlock was an unknown to the men in the unit, it was imperative that the AOB establish a baseline understanding of the mission of Flintlock, its reach and goals. As Flintlock is a Joint Chief of Staff exercise, it is one of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's primary tools in achieving joint- and multinational-training. Additionally, the exercise provides the Geographic Combatant Commander the primary means to train joint staff and for the staff to understand the functions of each section in a joint and combined environment. Although, the definition is broad in nature it gave the Green Berets a perspective of the exercise and an understanding of their new role in partnership



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with the Western and African partners. The role of the AOB was more of a collaboration of techniques, tactics and procedures between participating nations. During the execution of the Flintlock exercise, each ODA partnered with a Western SOF unit and served as the primary lead in advising African partners. The new role required the ODAs to adjust its role, which for 14 years had been as the lead partners to military units of the host nation. The ODAs experience in counterterrorism impressed both the Western and African partners, while their experience in combat became a foundation for building relationships and sharing learned TTPs.

Understanding the threats in the new AOR became of primary importance for all Soldiers in the unit. Familiarity with al-Qaeda and the Taliban was necessary operating in Afghanistan and neighboring countries, although we never called ourselves experts since the enemy continues to evolve. The threat in Africa is multifaceted in nature, there is not a single entity or influence that commands and controls other violent extremist organizations. An ODA in Africa can deploy to a country with a specific threat focus then deploy to a neighboring country that has a different threat. This is a daunting problem set, which was put to the test during the company's participation in Flintlock 2016. Each ODA conducted its respective planning and analyzed threats in support of the exercise. Once again, their previous experience proved valuable in using lessons learned. They not only identified potential enemy threats in Senegal and neighboring countries, but also identified other threats that could affect the effectiveness of the ODAs. A consideration was taking precautionary measures to ensure the health of team members due to the diseases that were endemic in the region. Exposure to mosquito infested places was the number one concern. The other threats were animals that are venomous, such as snakes and scorpions. Finally, we considered the threat of food borne illnesses.

Finally, the capabilities of the host nation in deterring threats were identified during mission planning. During the



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**A Green Beret from 3rd SFG(A) stands in formation at the opening ceremony for the Flintlock 2016 exercise in Senegal.**

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT. STEPHEN S. CLINE

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**U.S. Army Special Forces team member works with Senegalese soldiers in Thies, Senegal.**

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY ANDREA K. SERHAN

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**Senegalese Navy Special Operations officers conduct a CQB drill brief with 3rd SFG(A) team members and other partner-nation forces at St. Louis, Senegal, during Flintlock 2016.**

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAVID M. SHEFCHUK

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**3rd SFG(A) team members demonstrate range techniques to Senegalese Navy Special Operations officers, at St. Louis, Senegal during Flintlock 2016.**

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JANICE BURTON



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company's involvement in Flintlock 2016, the question was somewhat answered on the observed capability of the host nation. Although it was an indirect way of answering the threat question, it gave the AOB and ODAs an idea of how the host nation dealt with enemy threats in the area of operations. Although Senegal is a permissive country, there were still violent extremist organizations that continue to affect the security of the country. The VEOs affect other Islamic fundamentalist in the area either directly or indirectly. That is either through the transportation of supplies to terrorist organizations or facilitation of terror acts in the region. The threat level in Senegal may be lower than other African countries that fall under the area of operation of 3rd Special Forces Group (A), but it definitely gave the unit confidence in how the Senegalese security force handled the situation. The Senegal security forces may be a fraction of the size when compared to other nations, never the less, they are capable of analyzing threats. This was proven during Flintlock's culmination exercise; the Senegalese Intelligence Section was well versed regarding threats from enemies that could affect their security. They were able to conduct their version of intelligence preparation of the battlefield during the culmination exercise and inject realistic scenarios to the participants in the training. Their capability at the tactical- and operational-level of operations to track and analyze threats may differ from U.S. standards, but it is definitely working. An example of this was the ability to identify a potential terrorist act that the Government of Senegal was able to counter in January 2016 before the start of Flintlock. The Senegalese authorities apprehended more than 500 people who were suspected of planning terrorist acts as part of a security crackdown after terrorist attacks in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali.

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The transition of 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) to Africa has several questions that continue to surface because of lessons learned from previous deployments. This will continue to cycle until the unit becomes familiar with the challenges in Africa. Some of the questions that were answered due to the company's participation in the exercise were just a fraction of request for information that each ODA asked during its preparation for deployment. Additionally, Senegal is one of 12 countries in the AOR and answers that may be pertinent to Senegal may not be applicable in other countries. Flintlock 2016 was definitely a great introduction to the AOR giving the company a taste of what may come in future deployments.





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The experience in Senegal touched on several events and became helpful for future deployments. Some of these lessons learned are planning considerations for future missions in Africa, deployment requirements, area familiarization, resources available, necessary resources, redeployment, necessary support personnel and other factors that could help develop a sound plan. Although, Senegal is a beacon of peace and stability in West Africa and a strong economy in the region, it also shares a border with Mali, where AQIM is principally based in the Sahara Desert. The exercise in Senegal gave every Green Beret in the company a perspective on what to prepare and train for in future engagements in the AOR. The planning for Flintlock 2016 required the same commitment and received the same amount of attention 3rd SFG(A) dedicated to previous deployments. The big take away was that some elements that we took for granted when planning a mission in Afghanistan will not be favorable in Africa if we use the same approach. A good example is resources; the network of support established in Afghanistan obviously will not be the



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A 3rd SFG(A) Soldier conducts repelling operations with an African partner nation Soldier during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

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A 3rd SFG(A) team member works with Senegalese Commandos at the range during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

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3rd SFG(A) team members integrate with Senegalese Commando counterparts during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

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A Senegalese Commando and a 3rd SFG(A) team member work together at the range during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY ANDREA K. SERHAN

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A 3rd SFG(A) team member talks with his Senegalese counterparts during Flintlock 2016. Working together throughout the exercise helps build important relationships between partner nations. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

same as in any part of Africa. Food and water and other necessary supplies and services to self-sustain were very critical. Finding the right source and potentially the right organization to support the ODAs throughout the mission is a huge factor of successful planning. The challenges faced during the exercise were manageable, but it definitely was work intensive in ensuring the correct supplies and support were delivered on time and in the correct amount. A good back up plan will also be necessary just in case the primary plan does not supply the ODAs with the essential items. The resource constraints we experienced during the exercise were definitely a big challenge, which must be considered by an ODA preparing for deployment in the region. 

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Maj. Alexander B. Lazitan** is a Special Forces officer, who served as the AOB Commander during Flintlock 2016.