

# SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

BY STAFF SERGEANT KULANI J. LAKANARIA

# NORTH AND



# FORWARD — WEST AFRICA



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Special Operations Command Forward–North and West is a subordinate command of Special Operations Command–Africa, headquartered in Smith Barracks, Baumholder, Germany. As a subordinate command to SOCAFRICA, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) is a force provider and the lead for SOCFWD–NWA with support from all branches of the Department of Defense. SOCFWD–NWA is threat-focused and designed to move where the threats are in the region. Special operations forces enable the U.S. Africa Command to reduce strategic risk and still achieve campaign objectives.

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Senegalese Commandos conduct vehicle mounting drills during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

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SOC Forward–North and West Africa's area of responsibility spans 12 countries in the Maghreb, Chad River Basin and the Sahel regions in North and West Africa.

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A remote village in Senegal. African partner countries have vast areas to defend with large, geographically dispersed populations making it a challenge to provide security for the entire populace.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SENEGAL ARMY DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS (DIRPA)

**02**  
Canadian military forces conduct medevac training with African partner forces during Flintlock 2016. Limited medical resources combined with the challenging geographic environment and threats from the enemy, force medical personal operating in Africa to think outside the box on how to handle medical emergencies. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. ANDREA SERHAN

**03**  
A Senegalese Army medic and SOCAFRICA medics perform a dental procedure on a Senegalese woman. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SENEGAL ARMY DIRPA

North and West Africa remains a significant source of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, some of whom are starting to return with greater capabilities. Violent extremist organizations and foreign fighter flows; illegal immigration; and trafficking in narcotics, weapons and people, threaten allies on Europe's southern flank, which will create new opportunities for violent extremist organizations to expand their reach.

"Militarily the top threats to our African partners are Boko Haram, which is now known as Islamic State-West Africa, Islamic State in Libya and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," said Command Chief Warrant Officer 5 Robert L. Davis, 3rd Special Forces Group(A). "These threats do have non-military contributing factors such as lack of a stable economy, distrust of governments by some sectors of society, and inability of the governments to provide security to all areas within their countries. Some of the top threats to the military structures within our AOR are consistent with what is seen in most countries in which we work. These threats include a completely officer-centric force where NCOs are not afforded the same authorities or opportunities that you see with American military NCOs."

Understanding how to bring a military that is under immense pressure to bring its capabilities and confidence so it can effectively identify, locate, close with and destroy its enemies is invaluable.

"You have an enemy operating heavily in rural areas that are similar to Afghanistan," said Col. Robert A. Wilson, former 3rd SFG(A) commander. "They prey upon the population and do an immense amount of damage, take advantage of borders to thrive and fuel its organizations. You see the damages and toll that these violent extremists organizations take on society. Each African country is unique and extremely different than Afghanistan; the violence and the effects it has on the most vulnerable part of populations is something the Soldiers in 3rd SFG(A) can find familiar."

It's the tyranny of distance that plays a critical role to the African populations. Partner countries have vast areas that they have to defend and have large populations that are scattered and dispersed throughout their respective countries. It is challenging for the countries to protect their entire populace.

"The austere level of support to U.S. military forces in Africa has caused us to operate differently, the first thing that we have done is change the way that we train our Soldiers to respond to medical emergencies," said Col. Wilson. "In Afghanistan, the focus was to provide critical support until the point of medical evacuation, which normally came very rapidly. Overall we had a mature robust theater toward the end of the war that could provide all kinds of medical support relatively effectively. We are now operating in an area that is much larger and has more potential



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illnesses. Prolonged field care and sustaining a casualty for a very long time is something very different than what we find in the continental United States. We are spread out with limited medical resources in a very challenging environment with tremendous threats from not only the enemy but also from the geography, which is new to us. Our surgeons and our Special Forces medical sergeants are doing a phenomenal job taking a new approach medically. It affects our mission and how we prepare for our mission.”

“The second thing is logistics. We are constantly looking for ways that we can better support ourselves without external support so we can stay out in the field as long as possible with our African partners,” said Col. Wilson. “We are looking at how we do water purification in a place where you just can’t buy pallets of bottled water. We are tasking and evaluating water purification equipment and building packages to build command and control nodes with enough infrastructure to be able to set up in the middle of nowhere and operate as a command and control node. Those are some of the things that we are doing different from Afghanistan.”

Chief Warrant Officer 5 Davis has had experience in Africa before the realignment, and with the shift from United States Central Command to United States Africa Command there has been changes in the area of responsibility from the ‘90s.



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“A majority of the military problems that existed centered on internal civil wars and numerous coups,” said Chief Warrant Officer 5 Davis. “It seems as if one of the biggest changes were that some of the insurgent groups that were in existence during the ‘90s in Africa have assimilated into the main VEO threat streams (AQIM, IS-L and IS-WA) that our partners are facing today. In some ways, the threat has matured to a point where they are able to seize



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**01**  
A Burkina Faso Armed Forces soldier participates in Flintlock 2016 in Thies, Senegal. Soldiers from Burkina Faso partnered with Dutch Army Special Forces commandos to strengthen their infantry tactics, medical evacuation procedures and intelligence gathering methods.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY  
STAFF SGT. CHRISTOPHER KLUTTS

**02**  
Senegalese commandos conduct a rock drill prior to a mission during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT. STEPHEN S. CLINE

**03**  
A Senegalese soldier pulls security outside of a room being cleared during training near Thies, Senegal, during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. JOHN NICOLAS

**04**  
Senegalese Commando soldiers conduct a briefing with partner nation forces during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAVID M. SHEFCHUCK

**05**  
Partner-nation forces work together during Flintlock 2016. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

and hold terrain. On the positive side, it does appear that many of the militaries that we were working with have also matured. They may not be where they need to be as of yet; however, they do seem to be more professional and eager to learn in some ways.”

3rd SFG(A) is the lead force provider for SOCFWD-NWA. However, SOCFWD-NWA is a joint environment and forges a working relationship with personnel from all services.

“Our relationships with other SOF in our area of responsibility have never been better. We have SOF from the all services that conduct operations within our AOR,” said CWO 5 Davis.

Under the Special Operations Command and Control Element-Lake Chad Basin there are elements of the Army and Navy conducting the same mission sets. There are some areas within North and West Africa where Army units are under the tactical control of one of our sister services and some areas where our sister service SOF teams are under the tactical control of Army SOF.

“The group was originally formed in 1963 to provide an SF element to focus on the African Continent,” said CWO 5 Davis. “When we were re-constituted in 1991, it was with a focus on the Caribbean, Africa and the Middle-East. The focus on Africa was mostly North and West Africa with some focus in the Horn of Africa. Much of what we did in those days was focused on developing the military forces or even *gendarmes* where we worked to conduct peacekeeping and peace enforcement. Two of the major initiatives that we worked in the 1990s were the African Crisis Response Initiative, throughout West Africa, and Operation Focus Relief in Nigeria. The forces we



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trained during that time frame have been used on numerous operations throughout Africa in support of the African Union. Other operations centered on humanitarian assistance, demining and providing medical care throughout the continent. As I see it, 3rd SFG(A)’s return to Africa is a good thing. There are numerous challenges across the continent that exists, ranging from countering VEOs to improving stability and professionalism of partner nations. Our Soldiers are completely prepared to meet them head on. Even though our nation’s eyes are on the Middle East, we cannot lose sight of what is happening in Africa. Instability in Africa could be a catalyst for instability to develop in Europe and from there it is only a short distance away from the U.S.”

SOCFWD-NWA’s area of responsibility spans 12 countries in the Maghreb, Chad River Basin and the Sahel regions in North and West Africa. The countries included in this area of responsibility are Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Tunisia and Cameroon.

“SOCFWD-NWA benefits the overall AFRI-COM mission and objectives by providing a headquarters that is solely focused on synchronization of programs and operations in the north and west Africa region. SOCFWD-NWA also functions as a tactical headquarters that, in addition to the synchronization aspects of the mission, oversees the execution of the episodic and enduring events, thus ensuring a cohesive and concurrent long-term strategy for achieving



U.S. military objectives in support of our partner nations in NWA,” said Davis.

The 3rd SFG(A) was realigned into the African Continent and assumed the responsibility of SOCFWD-NWA. The African continent realignment is a major step for 3rd SFG(A). Historically the group was designed to focus on the dynamic and complex African Continent.

“For about 14 years 3rd SFG(A) has been primarily responsible for providing a preponderance of Special Forces units and Soldiers to Afghanistan,” said Col. Wilson. “Previously to that, we had primarily been operating in Africa. After 9/11, and the ensuing 14 years of war, we had become the group focused on Afghanistan. We have been doing very precise and specific missions in Afghanistan. As that mission was winding down, a decision was made that came rather sudden to us. We shifted focus of our area of responsibility from Central Asia back to Africa over the course of a year. While it was very unexpected, it was an exciting and daunting change of mission for us all because for more than a decade we had been focused on a narrow part of the world with a challenging and complex mission in an entirely different environment.”

With the transition back to Africa, 3rd SFG(A) did thorough preparations to better understand the unique mission.

“Upon receipt of the change of focus, we informed everyone and did a very good mission analysis to understand the things that would be asked of us on the African Continent,” said Col. Wilson. “We determined that the best way to assume this mission was to initially take charge of the command and control element first which would allow our line units, which comprise our operational detachments, companies and headquarters, sufficient time to get a deep understanding of the areas to which they would eventually deploy. We prepared for that as a headquarters by mission analysis, traveling and talking to people in the Department of Defense, AFRICOM, CIA, State Department and other places to get a good understanding of the mission and U.S. interests and how they meet them on the African Continent.”

The relationship with the State Department is critical, according to 3rd SFG(A) leadership. The U.S. military can’t achieve its military objectives in any country without the help of the State Department. SOCFWD-NWA supports the national security objectives, which require a “whole-of-government” approach. There are some aspects that are heavy on the military element of national power; however, there is nowhere in Africa that the U.S. is at war; our African partners are. What SOCFWD-NWA does in support of its partners requires the concurrence and a close working relationship with the Department of State.

“I found our partners in the State Department and interagency are extremely helpful. They got us on board to help us understand the mission much more effectively” said Col. Wilson “The synchronization of effort with the other agencies shows how we play a piece in public diplomacy. That is very refreshing to see and it showed the value of the approach the U.S. takes in support of its partners in Africa.”



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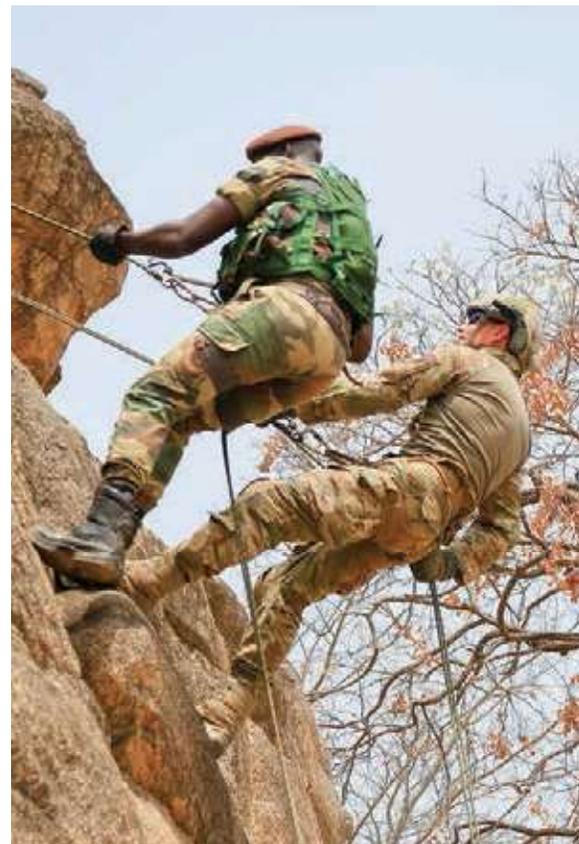
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Training 3rd SFG(A) personnel to conduct the new mission set was a priority to ensure that all personnel fulfilled their requirements.

“We trained the headquarters after having visited the Special Operations Command Forward-North and West Africa headquarters, at the time manned by 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne),” said Col. Wilson. “We’ve done a great deal of training at Fort Bragg on all the systems we would have to use in order to have effective command and control. One of the things that we looked at is our ability to sync with the U.S. Army Special Operations Command Commander’s priorities to operationalize the CONUS base. I’ve determined, as we took this mission, that the headquarters will be value added to the enterprise regardless if I was forward or the staff was forward or not. It was working to change the paradigm so that this headquarters was relevant to the special opera-



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tions missions on the continent. At the end of August, I deployed with the core of my staff to Germany where the SOCFWD-NWA headquarters is located. I was collocated with the Theater Special Operations Command, SOCAFRICA and AFRICOM in Stuttgart. We immediately took responsibility for that mission.”

Over the last decade, SOCFWD-NWA was staffed by 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne). During the Global War on Terror, 3rd SFG(A) was reallocated to Afghanistan to tackle its unique problem sets.

“I have a great preexisting relationship with Col. Brian S. Petit, the retiring deputy commander of 10th SFG(A), who was the SOCFWD-NWA commander at the time,” said Col. Wilson. “We served together in Afghanistan and I knew him pretty well. I took the opportunity to go forward with key members of my staff and met with him for a long time and talked to him on a daily basis to get a better understanding of the mission. That equates a pivotal role in the transition. At the time the 10th SFG(A) Commander, Col. George K. Thiebes, and his successor Col. Isaac J. Peltier,

**YOU KNOW YOU'RE GOING TO BE A PART OF A LONG PROGRESSION OF 3RD SFG(A) PEOPLE WHO ARE GOING TO WORK HARD AND BE AT THE TABLE OF EXPERTS ON AFRICA**



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agreed to provide some of the core staff so that we had continuity. One of his battalion commanders became my deputy commander in the SOCFWD-NWA, which ensured that we had someone with experience in Africa and someone who had worked with the preponderance of forces on the continent. That really helped to make a seamless, smooth and effective transition.”

Transitioning from Afghanistan to Africa initially had a few challenges but the 3rd SFG(A) adapted to the new mission set and was able to use lessons learned from central Asia and cater them to their needs in Africa.

“We were by no means complacent in Afghanistan over the last 14 years,” said Col. Wilson. “To be complacent is to risk disaster. We had grown very familiar and comfortable with the Afghanistan mission. We knew the people, terrain and the enemy. That played into the calculus on how to prepare for that mission and how we executed it. Most people in the group have never served in Africa. Africa is tremendously larger and more complex than Afghanistan. The geographic vastness of it is enormous. It takes your breath away. We were all daunted by the complexity of the mission. We were going into a new mission where most of us have no experience and we know by the time you leave this organization and the job you’re in, you will only have scratched the surface. That, in itself, is daunting. You know you’re going to be a part of a long progression of

3rd SFG(A) people who are going to work hard and be at the table of the experts on Africa: I think that was a big change. Going from a place where you’re side-by-side in combat with your Afghan counterparts to a place where the United States is not at war, but our partners are, is daunting as well. In Afghanistan, for the most part, the United States military had the primacy to conduct operations. In Africa, you are working very closely with the country team and the U.S. Ambassador has primacy of the mission in whatever country to which you are assigned. People expected that 3rd SFG(A) having been in combat for 14 years would find this mission a challenge. It’s true we did, but there is a lot of things that we do in Africa that are identical to what we had to do in combat in the last 14 years. Everything that we do to succeed or fail is by, with and through our African partners. We are not going to win these conflicts alone or achieve the African partner’s objectives alone. Everything we do has to be done through our partners. It was the same thing in Afghanistan. Helping our partners to reach their capacity is extremely important. Recognizing the linkages between the military component and what’s going on in the societal component is critical in Afghanistan but equally important in Africa. Our mission is very complex and different but there are many things that are interchangeable.”

In Africa it is critical to show our African partners the value of working with the U.S.

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**Senegalese Commandos and a 3rd SFG(A) team member review training plans during Flintlock 2016.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO

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

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**Senegalese Navy Special Operations Forces practice combatives on each other during Close Quarter Battle drills in St. Louis, Senegal.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAVID M. SHEFCHUCK



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military. SOCFWD-NWA has to help partner nations achieve their interests as well as the U.S. national interests.

"We show our African partners the benefits of our professional military, the synchronization of operations, intelligence, logistics and other resourcing, mission planning both at the operational and tactical levels. Additionally, because we're looking at North and West Africa, we provide that unique perspective, so all the other regional partners understand what others are doing and how the reactions and counter-reactions affect what they are doing against the problem set," said Col. George W. Sterling, the former SOCFWD-NWA deputy commander.

## FLINTLOCK

SOCFWD-NWA is responsible for the annual Flintlock Exercise. The Flintlock Exercise started in 2005 across the Sahel Region of Africa. Participating nations are members of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership. The exercise is planned by African partner-nation SOF and SOCAFRICA to develop the capacity and collaboration among African security forces to protect civilian populations.

"The Flintlock exercise, at its core, is a special operations counterterrorism exercise," said Lt. Col. William D. Rose, Flintlock 2016 exercise director, with SOCAFRICA. "It is designed specifically to train and exercise regional forces by country among our African partners specifically focused on North and West Africa to

counter the relevant threats that they are dealing with today."

Flintlock 2016 was hosted in Senegal with outstations in Mauritania during the month of February.

"Flintlock this year was full of 'firsts' — it was the first time we incorporated riverine training into the event, the first time we incorporated law enforcement directly into Flintlock and the first time we trained African military forces on mountaineering skills," said Brig. Gen. Donald C. Bolduc, SOCAFRICA commander. "We had more than 2,220 participants from a variety of career fields, not only SOF but also SOF enablers, planners and support staff. My assessment isn't the most important; the assessment of the 29 participating nations is what I'm most concerned with... and they've let us know how valuable Flintlock training is for them because they've continued to increase their participation and send units back year after year. The most important impact I see from Flintlock are the relationships built between participants. African military and law enforcement units work together for three weeks during a challenging scenario, but the long-term relationship they've built lasts throughout the year."

Although SOCFWD-NWA primarily serves as trainers, personnel also take back lessons learned from their peers.

"From a U.S. standpoint specifically, we are learning as much as we are bringing to the table," said Rose. "Our African partners are just that — they are partners and our peers. What



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Senegalese Soldiers raise the flag of Senegal during the opening ceremony for Flintlock 2016 in Thies, Senegal. U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SPC. DAVID M. SHEFCHUCK

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Senegalese Navy Special Operations Forces and Dutch Special Operations Forces conduct a maritime drug interdiction exercise in St. Louis, Senegal, during Flintlock 2016.

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A troop of Senegalese Commandos put on a combatives display at Thies, Senegal, during Flintlock 2016.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY JENNIFER G. ANGELO



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they have learned on a daily basis they bring to this event, share it with us, and we learn how we can integrate our assets and our resources and efforts into countering these regional and terrorist threats that they may face."

"Flintlock is the type of event that creates connections between African, European and U.S. units that we're able to leverage when there's a crisis — you're able to pick up the phone and talk to someone you know and trust, someone who shares the same business practices and ways of operating as you do. That's invaluable when there's an event where you need to work together. Cross-border cooperation is key to solving many of the complex problems seen in Africa, and Flintlock is an event fostering this sort of engagement. As Flintlock grows its impacts can't be understated," Bolduc explained.

"Flintlock 2016 was a resounding success to the interoperability and continued development of relationships between not only numerous African nations that participated but the numerous other nations as well," said CWO5 Davis. "The overall importance of continuing annual exercises like Flintlock centers around the African nations continuing to develop trust and share best practices amongst each other. The problems that exist in African nations with VEOs and instability do not typically end at any one border. They are regional problems and all the nations in our AOR must work together to solve them." 

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Staff Sgt. Kulani J. Lakanaria** is a Public Affairs NCO assigned to 3rd Special Forces Group (A).