

Cultural Awareness and Irregular Warfare:

French Army Experience in Africa

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FOR OVER 40 YEARS, French soldiers have learned the hard way the various challenges of counterinsurgency (COIN) and security and stability operations (SASO) in Africa. While training African troops and territorial militia, they have confronted profound cultural gaps and, since the 1960s, have been involved in what Marine Corps General James N. Mattis recently termed “a four-block war in a hybrid war environment,” in which their units have been called upon to frequently transition between various forms of conventional operations (first block) and less usual pacification, psychological, and information operations (blocks 2-4).¹ In light of the Department of the Army’s (DA’s) current focus on unconventional warfare and cultural awareness, it might be of some utility to consider what DA’s brothers-in-arms have learned over 4 decades of operational deployment in Africa. What kind of operational challenges did they encounter, and how did they address them?

Operational Focus: Africa

It may not seem that Africa ranks with Iraq or Afghanistan as the main effort in the war on terrorism. In the post-9/11 era, however, it looms on America’s strategic horizon. The continent’s persistent lack of security will allow terrorist groups to use African states as operational bases. The United States and France share a common approach to this security challenge. Through growing cooperation with regional and pan-African organizations, both nations have built a similar policy that rests on two dominant pillars: training African forces, and providing logistical support to African peacekeeping operations. In each area, a partnership with the African Union and resulting assistance programs have already improved African military capabilities.²

To provide African forces with the necessary skills and resources to carry out difficult missions, Pentagon officials have secured agreements with 10 South and West African nations. These agreements allow the U.S. military to temporarily use facilities to launch missions, train armed forces, and preposition support platforms, equipment and supplies.³ Pursuing a similarly proactive strategy to help Africans help themselves, France has announced it

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will reposition its thousands of African-based troops into three African bases that conform with three AU sub-regions: Senegal in West Africa, Gabon in Central Africa, and Djibouti in eastern Africa.⁴

Adjusting to new realities in the war on terrorism and facing the uncertainty of peace and security in Africa, Western and African nations will continue to forge cooperative ties. “Africa is everybody’s problem and everybody’s responsibility,” warned General James L. Jones, the commander of U.S. European Command. Jones also suggested that, given Africa’s importance, his command may have to amend its name in the future to encompass the southern continent.⁵ The U.S. military already plays a significant role in training sub-Saharan forces. More individuals and units will be called tomorrow either to train African forces or to fight hybrid wars like those recently occurring in Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, and Djibouti.

Learning Africa: Sooner Is Better

French soldiers have repeatedly had to face unconventional warfare and the difficulties of operating in Africa’s many different cultures. It takes time to learn about and understand a foreign culture and to then determine how to apply the knowledge gained to all types of military operations. The sooner young French leaders learn about Africa, the more confident and, ultimately, the more successful they are when deployed.

Before any deployment planning begins, platoon leaders go through an overseas operations training course designed primarily to teach them how to fight an insurgency. They learn about the diversity of African cultures, traditions, and warfighting approaches. Then they are taught how to apply this knowledge when training national forces and territorial militia and attempting to win the hearts and minds of local villagers in rebellious areas. In regards to the African forces training, they learn how to make progress with people who are not as deadline-conscious as we are, who don’t work in a linear fashion of schedules and planning, and who don’t value controlling processes as we do. They are also taught how to maintain the fighting spirit of African units by favoring their traditional approach to warfighting, and advised to keep ethnic groups within the same units in order to benefit from their core lineage.

When I attended the course as a platoon leader, the two initial required readings were T.E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and Roger Trinquier’s *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*. The curriculum was designed to teach us about African cultures, local intelligence collection, African approaches to warfighting, local forces combat readiness, and African unit training. Basically, we learned to identify the various ethnic and religious forces in West Africa and the Horn and the ways they influence political and social life. We were taught how to apply this knowledge to keep the initiative in COIN, SASO, and the training of African forces.

The course addressed some key questions we had as young, inexperienced platoon leaders: How to be both a rifleman and a vital intelligence collector? How to translate subtle changes in the population’s habits or in individual behaviors into vital intelligence data? How to track guerilla infrastructure and simultaneously run pacification programs in



U.S. Air Force

French Army Captain Staphane Vidal of the Escadron de Chasse 2/3 (“Champagne”) participates as a patient in a Joint U.S. Forces/French simulated patient recovery exercise in Djibouti, Africa, 27 February 2006.



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French forces live-fire in Chad, 2006.

our areas of responsibility? How to train African units and militia? How to conduct COIN, SASO, and peacekeeping operations in the desert, tropical zones, and urban areas? How to execute specific tactics, techniques, and procedures such as urban assault, checkpoint control, cordon and search, convoy protection, and border control?

Our instructor was a colonel, a veteran of Algeria's wars who had spent half of his career in Africa. Borrowing from T.E. Lawrence's aphorism—"Messieurs, just don't eat soup with a knife"—he showed us how cultural adjustments can reap great benefits and how unconventional warfare forces leaders to think creatively while executing a variety of nontraditional military operations (civil affairs, psychological operations, intelligence collection). In retrospect, learning Africa from him gave us confidence; it infused us with two critical aspects of the expeditionary culture—innovative thinking and agility. At all levels of responsibility throughout our careers, we immeasurably benefited from this early instruction on African culture and unconventional warfare.

Culture in the Field

By the time we left the colonel and our platoon leaders course behind, we had fully imbibed the quintessential principles needed to conduct successful unconventional warfare. One of these principles was to never underestimate the enemy. We applied this when we were confronted with an insurgency in Chad, a mutiny in the Central African Republic, a

succession of warlords in Somalia, and a rebellion in Rwanda. African fighters are usually very effective on the ground. They take advantage of terrain they know by heart, and they master ancestral guerrilla techniques enhanced by lethal weapons systems. Although their equipment is often technologically inferior, African tribal fighters possess huge resources of creativity and are tactically sophisticated enough to inflict heavy casualties. They deftly use the population's support, time usually works to their advantage, and their leaders are highly motivated.

So, to cut an insurgency at its roots, we searched out and destroyed supply caches and command cells, but only while simultaneously running information and hearts-and-minds campaigns among the population. What we nowadays term "civil-affairs operations," "psychological operations," and "pacification" were then listed as tactical tasks in our operation orders. Prosecuting a four-block war was integral to operations. In that respect, every individual soldier became a collector of crucial local intelligence. Intelligence collection became a combat skill as valuable as expert marksmanship, audacious maneuver, and innovative tactics.

In order to pave the way for better intelligence feedback and to prevent the creation of breeding grounds for insurgency, we worked (sometimes using interpreters) with tribal chiefs, local mayors, imams, and marabouts, providing the inhabitants with what they needed to improve their living conditions. We built schools, drilled wells, repaired bridges, and provided medical support.

Our overseas education also taught us the value of making cultural adjustments while training indigenous forces in West Africa and the Horn. We learned about the hidden elements of local cultures and became familiar with the iceberg metaphor, which served to remind us that one key to mission success is knowing about the expanse of culture that exists below the surface of immediate perception.

Such knowledge was invaluable for young leaders. African national forces usually train and fight according to Western doctrine. Their troops are disciplined and dedicated to protecting their nations.

Formula for Success

Knowledge of traditions, religious beliefs, and hidden superstitions is especially beneficial when fighting guerillas or training African forces. Thus, the French Army addresses the operational aspects of local cultures throughout its war-fighting education, pre-deployment training, and professional education curriculum. Teaching leaders early in their careers to understand culture, tradition, and diverse African approaches to warfare has been the key to operational success on the ground.

Expeditionary forces, regardless of their nationality, stand ready to deploy anywhere on short notice. In unconventional warfare, even the least experienced leader is expected to react quickly and properly to turn initially suspicious or hostile populations into cooperative assets. For an officer to succeed, civil-affairs, psychological operations, and intelligence collection must become individual combat skills. In Africa, as well as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other areas of interest, the effectiveness of Army leaders depends upon their ability to take operational advantage of local traditions and cultures and the way they profoundly shape wills and behaviors. Integrating unconventional warfare and the operational aspects of culture into every facet of the warfighter's education has been one of the pillars of the French expeditionary experience. **MR**

NOTES

1. LTG James N. Mattis and LTC Frank G. Hoffman, "Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars," *Proceedings* 132, online at <<http://www.usni.org/proceedings/Articles05/Pro11Mattis.htm>>, accessed 17 May 2006. "Four-block war" is Mattis's expansion of former Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak's concept of "three-block war." Krulak claimed that today's expeditionary Soldier must be able to fight in one city block, hand out humanitarian supplies in the next block, and then make peace between warring factions in yet another block. To this requirement, Mattis adds the necessity of conducting effective information operations.

2. Two such programs are the U.S.'s African Contingency Operations and Training Assistance and France's Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capabilities.

3. John T. Bennett, "Jones: U.S. has 'security locations' deals with up to 10 African nations," *Inside the Pentagon*, 27 October 2005.

4. The French plan was unveiled in December 2005 at the Franco-African summit in Bamako, Mali.

5. Jim Garamone, "Africa Integral to U.S. European Command, General Says," American Forces Press Service, March 2005.



A French soldier of the 110th Infantry Regiment stands guard at a camp in the Ivory Coast, 2006.

Like Western soldiers they are proud to serve their various countries. This shapes the tip of the cultural iceberg. Below the surface, however, many Africans are torn between their cultural heritage and the West's modernity. Loyalty to lineage, family, and religious and ethnic groups often far outweighs allegiance to the state or national institutions. Ethnic and religious obedience, as well as caste identity, remain particularly strong, shaping mentalities and conditioning behaviors. Western military trainers or allied forces must therefore keep in mind that the loyalty of some Africans to their government or to a multinational coalition is often subject to challenges that can be as sudden as they are subtle.

There are beliefs and practices below the cultural surface that many Westerners miss or find difficult to fathom: a company commander in Chad shooting one of his lieutenants in the head for lack of respect in front of the unit; a captain, native of the south of Mauritania, paying obedience to his second lieutenant, who was a member of a dominant northern tribe; regular soldiers killing women and children execution-style in Rwanda. Despite these disturbing occurrences, our training allowed us to continue to walk down these less traveled roads and to continue functioning effectively; we found mission success by strengthening relationships with the local military and the population. Altogether, we were deeply aware that cultural adjustments were vital to mission accomplishment.