



Oceans Apart...

By Major Mark Deets '90, USMC

WE BOTH GRADUATED FROM THE U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY IN 1990, BUT THERE THE SIMILARITIES SEEM TO END.

He grew up playing on the beach near the fish market known as Soubédioune in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, population 2.5 million. I grew up playing on the Cookie League Baseball Field in Beloit, KS, population 4,000.

He came from a family of Cape Verdean immigrants to Senegal in the 1950s. I came from a family of German immigrants to Pennsylvania in the 1750s. He grew up speaking Portuguese Creole, French and Wolof. I grew up speaking English—and only English—with a Midwestern twang. To say the least, we come from different worlds or “oceans apart” if you will, but from January 2005 to July 2007, we shared some of the same

world in Dakar—he as a staff officer for the Senegalese navy and me as the U.S. Marine and Defense Attaché (DATT) to Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde.

I recognized a familiar face once I saw him again in Dakar, but I never knew Jean-Jacques Lopez '90 while at the Naval Academy. Though classmates, I had no idea that he was the first African to attend Annapolis. I understood in part as another Plebe, I did not fully comprehend the scope of the challenge Jean-Jacques faced at the Naval Academy—just making it through the place while learning a new culture in a second language. Jean-Jacques spoke some English when he came to Annapolis, but

Major Mark Deets '90, USMC, with then-Midshipmen Andrew Droddy '08 and Eric Gardiner '08, and Professor Elizabeth Knutson in Thies, Senegal, the home of the Senegalese Military Academy, or "L'Ecole Nationale des Officiers d'Active (ENOA)"

he still had to learn some new vocabulary to survive. Jean-Jacques told me he learned what broccoli was by watching what the other Plebes passed down the table when an upperclassman demanded a serving of the stuff (for some inexplicable reason) during Plebe Summer.

I thought that Plebe life was demanding enough. As an 18-year-old greenhorn fresh out of high school, I remember respecting and being ever so slightly jealous of the worldliness and know-how of my prior enlisted and NAPS-experienced classmates. But at least I already knew what broccoli was. Serving as the DATT to four African countries that speak three different languages¹ taught me the importance of language in our globalized world. However, I have not faced the pressure of Plebe Summer at the same time that I tried to refine my French—the equivalent of the challenge that Jean-Jacques faced with his English in the summer of 1986.

Our worlds differed even when it came to sports. Jean-Jacques lettered as a member of the men's volleyball team. I lettered as a wrestler, but wrestlers did not see a lot of the volleyball team. While I grew up cheering on George Brett and the Kansas City Royals against the hated New York Yankees, Jean-Jacques grew up cheering "Les Lions," the Senegalese national soccer team. Though I knew a few soccer players at the Academy, I did not fully comprehend how much the sport meant to Jean-Jacques and the rest of the world until I moved to Senegal, where the Senegalese victory over the French in the 2002 World Cup Championship is replayed on national television time and time again. Clearly, there was a lot about Jean-Jacques's world I could not have understood before I became a USMC Foreign Area Officer (FAO) for

Sub-Saharan Africa and later the DATT to Senegal. Thankfully, that has changed now.

Growing African Engagement

The 1980s were a different time. U.S. policymakers considered Africa either a playground in which to combat the Soviets by proxy or an obstacle to go over or around in order to reach a strategic location more important to U.S. interests in the Cold War. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. policymakers started paying more attention to Africa, its challenges, and its people in the hope of denying terrorists another haven like Afghanistan from which to train and prepare for attacks on American interests. As the U.S. military ramped up its African engagement, I became more familiar with Jean-Jacques Lopez.

I got to know Jean-Jacques better at about the same time that the U.S. Navy began to know Africa better. During my tour in Senegal, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe (NAVEUR), along with the rest of the Department of Defense, began to place a new emphasis on engagement in Africa. NAVEUR specifically focused on the resource-abundant Gulf of Guinea region, comprised of the West African coastal waters from Cote d'Ivoire to Angola. The geostrategic importance of Senegal and Cape Verde to this effort has brought more and more U.S. Marines and Sailors to ports in both countries. And both countries can boast of political stability and relatively good infrastructure while being located halfway between the Gulf of Guinea and the Sixth Fleet's location in the Mediterranean Sea. While I was in Senegal, Dakar was also the only port in sub-Saharan Africa from which the U.S. Navy was authorized to buy fresh fruits and vegetables.

Because of these advantages, NAVEUR's "sustained presence" brought 13 U.S. ship visits to Senegal and 15 to Cape Verde during fiscal year 2006. Many came as a result of two important multilateral exercises—the British-led GREEN OSPREY in Senegal—to which NAVEUR contributed forces as a part of its biannual West African Training Cruise—and the NATO-led STEADFAST JAGUAR in Cape Verde. These exercises became symbolic of the growing U.S. Navy and Marine Corps commitment to the continent of Africa. The creation of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) as an independent unified command on 1 October 2008 will provide further impetus for U.S. Navy and Marine Corps familiarity with the region. More and more Naval Academy graduates will find themselves in the near future on the African continent. Knowledge of the region and enduring relationships with its leaders will prove important to their success.

... Brought Together

Lieutenant Commander John Hartman '90, USNR, a Foreign Service Officer, who first mentioned Jean-Jacques's name to me while we were going through language training together in 2004 at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in Washington. John wanted to know what a Marine officer was doing at FSI. When I told him I would be going to Dakar in 2005 as the DATT, he immediately mentioned that our classmate, Jean-Jacques Lopez, was from Senegal. Since I did not know Jean-Jacques while we were at the Academy, I asked a few basic questions and moved on from the conversation, doubtful that I would ever meet Jean-Jacques.



Major Mark Deets '90, USMC with Senegalese Navy Lieutenant Commander Oumar Wade (a peer of Jean-Jacques's who attended the British Military Academy at Sandhurst) at a French ship reception in Dakar, Senegal

Major Deets '90 and Jean-Jacques Lopez '90 in Dakar, Senegal, in Spring 2007. Photos courtesy of Major Deets.



Shortly after I landed in Dakar, however, Jean-Jacques's name came up again and again in conversation with U.S. and Senegalese officials after they learned of my Naval Academy background. I learned that Jean-Jacques was an intelligent and well-respected officer in the Senegalese navy who had become a natural "go-to guy" when questions about the U.S. Navy came up among the Senegalese navy staff. However, it was not until I hosted my first U.S. Navy ship visit several months later that I met Jean-Jacques for the first time at the in-port brief with the ship's crew. The Senegalese Navy Chief of Staff had sent Jean-Jacques to the meeting to ensure the bilateral cooperation needed to pull off the ship visit and the subsequent multilateral exercise (GREEN OSPREY).

From that meeting on, Jean-Jacques and I reaped the harvest of a professional and personal bond made possible by the seeds planted during our "four years by the Bay." What a pleasure it was to get to know Jean-Jacques, his wife Odile and their two children while his family and mine enjoyed life together in Dakar. Jean-Jacques and I often reminisced about our time at the Naval Academy during

discussions about U.S.-Senegalese relations, the political-military situation in West Africa and the ongoing U.S. War on Terrorism. Most of these discussions took place in French (something that would have been impossible for me in 1990) and as is so often the case, over good food and wine. (Jean-Jacques is the wine connoisseur, not me.) In any case, we had certainly come a long way from the beach at Soumbédioune and the Cookie League Baseball Field in Beloit.

The Payoff

The investment in African officers like Jean-Jacques at the Naval Academy is invaluable. Though not his job to handle U.S. ship visits, I depended on Jean-Jacques's experience, language ability and knowledge of both navies for the exigent liaison before, during and after the visits of U.S. Navy ships and Marine Corps units. The value of being able to talk to someone from the host nation who not only speaks our language but who also understands our way of

thinking and operating—and some of the reasons behind both—is immeasurable.

I left Senegal in the summer of 2007 to return to the Naval Academy to teach history with the hope that I could help increase midshipmen's familiarity with the African continent. Through the new initiatives at the Naval Academy to increase cultural and global awareness, I went back to Senegal in March with Midshipmen Andrew Droddy '08 and Eric Gardiner '08 and French Professor Elizabeth Knutson. While midshipmen (now Ensigns) Droddy and Gardiner spent their spring break at the Senegalese Military Academy, digging into defensive positions and learning to eat rice and fish with their hands, Professor Knutson and I visited a handful of Senegalese educational institutions to investigate the possibilities for a French language immersion program in Senegal. Then—Midshipmen Droddy (who choose SWO for service selection) and Gardiner (who chose SEALs) enjoyed a unique spring break experience while practicing their French and learning about the culture of an important U.S. ally in West Africa. Though Jean-Jacques was deployed as the military assistant to the Deputy Commander of UN Operations in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI), the contacts he helped me establish during my tour as the Defense Attaché proved invaluable to the success of the trip. If he could have been there, I know he would have been happy to see these fine young men from his alma mater getting to know his country for the first time.

As Jean-Jacques has said, *le monde est petit* (it's a small world). We may have started life "oceans apart," but our worlds were brought together in Annapolis, and both our nations have benefited. Let us hope that as the U.S. Navy-Marine Corps team continues to support and

defend U.S. interests in Africa, both partners will mutually benefit. If that is to be the goal, opening our education and training institutions—and perhaps even some of our operational institutions—to bright African officers like Jean-Jacques must continue to be part of our strategy. For in Dakar, as elsewhere, “...when classmates be reunited and old tales be retold...” Americans and Africans can win. ♣

Major Mark W. Deets '90, USMC, has been an instructor in the Department of History since August 2007. Previously he served as the U.S. Marine and Defense Attaché in Dakar, Senegal from 2005 until his arrival at the Naval Academy. Other previous assignments include postings as a White House Aircraft Commander and UH-1N Operational Test Director with Marine Helicopter Squadron One (1999-2002) and Assistant Operations Officer and UH-1N Weapons and Tactics Instructor with the “Stingers” of Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 267 (1993-1998). His personal decorations include the Navy-Marine Corps Commendation Medal and the Defense Distinguished Service Medal. Major Deets earned his M.A. in National Security Affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School (2004) in Monterey, CA, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa for later designation as a USMC Foreign Area Officer for Africa.

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¹The official languages of most African countries are tied to the history of European colonialism in Africa. Consequently, the “official” language of Senegal is French; the official language of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde is Portuguese; and the official language of The Gambia is English. However, an indigenous language is often more widely-spoken on African streets and in African villages and may be declared a “national” language, e.g. Wolof in Senegal and The Gambia, Portuguese Creole in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde.

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