

Sex, Drugs, and Dead Soldiers: What US Africa Command Doesn't Want You to Know

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Global Research, April 22, 2015

[TomDispatch](#) 21 April 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

A U.S. Marine during a field training in the African nation of Djibouti in 2012. 'For years,' writes Turse, 'as U.S. military personnel moved into Africa in ever-increasing numbers, AFRICOM has effectively downplayed, disguised, or covered-up almost every aspect of its operations, from the locations of its troop deployments to those of its expanding string of outposts.' (Photo: AFRICOM/flickr/cc)

Six people lay lifeless in the filthy brown water.

It was 5:09 a.m. when their Toyota Land Cruiser plunged off a bridge in the West African country of Mali. For about two seconds, the SUV sailed through the air, pirouetting 180 degrees as it plunged 70 feet, crashing into the Niger River.

Three of the dead were American commandos. The driver, a captain nicknamed "Whiskey Dan," was the leader of a shadowy team of operatives never profiled in the media and rarely [mentioned](#) even in government publications. One of the passengers was from an even more secretive unit whose work is often integral to Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which conducts clandestine kill-and-capture missions overseas. Three of the others weren't military personnel at all or even Americans. They were Moroccan women alternately described as barmaids or "prostitutes."

The six deaths followed an April 2012 all-night bar crawl through Mali's capital, Bamako, according to a formerly classified report by U.S. Army criminal investigators. From dinner and drinks at a restaurant called Blah-Blah's to more drinks at La Terrasse to yet more at Club XS and nightcaps at Club Plaza, it was a rollicking swim through free-flowing vodka. And vodka and Red Bull. And vodka and orange juice. And vanilla pomegranate vodka. And Chivas Regal. And Jack Daniels. And Corona beer. And Castel beer. And don't forget B-52s, a drink generally made with Kahlúa, Grand Marnier, and Bailey's Irish Cream. The bar tab at Club Plaza alone was the equivalent of \$350 in U.S. dollars.

At about 5 a.m. on April 20th, the six piled into that Land Cruiser, with [Captain Dan Utley](#) behind the wheel, to head for another hotspot: Bamako By Night. About eight minutes later, Utley called a woman on his cell phone to ask if she was angry. He said he'd circle back and pick her up, but she told him not to bother. Utley then handed the phone to Maria Laol, one of the Moroccan women. "Don't be upset. We'll come back and get you," she said. The woman on the other end of the call then heard screaming before the line went dead.

A Command With Something to Hide

In the years since, U.S. Africa Command or AFRICOM, which is responsible for military operations on that continent, has remained remarkably silent about this shadowy incident in a country that had recently seen its democratically elected president deposed in a coup led by an American-trained officer, a country with which the U.S. had suspended military relations a month earlier. It was, to say the least, strange. But it wasn't the first time U.S. military personnel died under murky circumstances in Africa, nor the first (or last) time the specter of untoward behavior led to a criminal investigation. In fact, as American military operations have ramped up across Africa, reaching a [record 674 missions](#) in 2014, reports of excessive drinking, sex with prostitutes, drug use, sexual assaults, and other forms of violence by AFRICOM personnel have escalated, even though many of them have been kept under wraps for weeks or months, sometimes even for years.

"Our military is built on a reputation of enduring core values that are at the heart of our character," Major (then Brigadier) General [Wayne Grigsby Jr.](#), the [former](#) chief of AFRICOM's subordinate command, Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), [wrote](#) in an address to troops last year. "Part of belonging to this elite team is living by our core values and professionalism every day. Incorporating those values into everything we do is called our profession of arms."

But legal documents, Pentagon reports, and criminal investigation files, many of them obtained by *TomDispatch* through dozens of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and never before revealed, demonstrate that AFRICOM personnel have all too regularly behaved in ways at odds with those "core values." The squeaky clean image the command projects through news releases, official testimony before Congress, and mainstream media [articles](#) — often by cherry-picked [journalists](#) who are [granted](#) access to otherwise unavailable personnel and [locales](#) — doesn't hold up to inspection.

"As a citizen and soldier, I appreciate how important it is to have an informed public that helps to provide accountable governance and is also important in the preservation of the trust between a military and a society and nation it serves," AFRICOM Commander General David Rodriguez [said](#) at a press conference last year. Checking out these revelations of misdeeds with AFRICOM'S media office to determine just how representative they are, however, has proven impossible.

I made several hundred attempts to contact the command for comment and clarification while this article was being researched and written, but was consistently rebuffed. Dozens of phone calls to public affairs personnel went unanswered and scores of email requests were ignored. At one point, I called AFRICOM media chief Benjamin Benson 32 times on a single business day from a phone that identified me by name. It rang and rang. He never picked up. I then placed a call from a different number so my identity would not be apparent. He answered on the second ring. After I identified myself, he claimed the connection was bad and the line went dead. Follow-up calls from the second number followed the same pattern — a behavior repeated day after day for weeks on end.

This strategy, of course, mirrored the command's consistent efforts to keep embarrassing incidents quiet, concealing many of them and acknowledging others only with the sparsest of reports. The command, for example, [issued](#) a five-sentence press release regarding those deaths in Bamako. They provided neither the names of the Americans nor the identities of the "three civilians" who perished with them. They failed to mention that the men were with the Special Operations forces, noting only that the deceased were "U.S. military members." For months after the crash, the Pentagon kept secret the name of Master

Sergeant Trevor Bast, a communications technician with the Intelligence and Security Command (whose personnel often work closely with JSOC) — until the information was [pried out](#) by the *Washington Post's* Craig Whitlock.

“It must be noted that the activities of U.S. military forces in Mali have been very public,” Colonel Tom Davis of AFRICOM [told TomDispatch](#) in the wake of the deaths, without explaining why the commandos were still in the country a month after the United States had [suspended](#) military relations with Mali’s government. In the years since, the command has released no additional information about the episode.

True to form, AFRICOM’s Benjamin Benson failed to respond to requests for comment and clarification, but according to the final report on the incident by Army criminal investigators (obtained by *TomDispatch* through a FOIA request), the deaths of Utlely, Bast, Sergeant First Class Marciano Myrthil, and the three women “were accidental, however [Captain] Utlely’s actions were negligent resulting in the passengers’ deaths.” A final review by a staff judge advocate from Special Operations Command Africa found that there was probable cause to conclude Utlely was guilty of negligent homicide.

AFRICOM’s Sex Crimes

The criminal investigation of the incident in Mali touched upon relationships between U.S. military personnel and African “females.” Indeed, the U.S. military has many regulations regarding [romantic attachments](#) and [sexual activity](#). AFRICOM personnel have not always adhered to such strictures and, in the course of my reporting, I asked Benson if the command has had a problem with sexual misconduct. He never responded.

In recent years, allegations of widespread sex crimes have dogged the U.S. military. A Pentagon survey [estimated](#) that 26,000 members of the armed forces were sexually assaulted in 2012, though just one in 10 of those victims [reported](#) the assaults. In 2013, the number of personnel reporting such incidents [jumped](#) by 50% to 5,518 and last year reached nearly 6,000. Given the gross underreporting of sexual assaults, it’s impossible to know how many of these crimes involved AFRICOM personnel, but documents examined by *TomDispatch* suggests a problem does indeed exist.

In August 2011, for example, a Marine with Joint Enabling Capabilities Command assigned to AFRICOM was staying at a hotel in Germany, the site of the command’s headquarters. He began making random room-to-room calls that were eventually traced. According to court martial documents examined by *TomDispatch*, the recipient of one of them said the “subject matter of the phone call essentially dealt with a solicitation for a sexual tryst.”

About a week after he began making the calls, the Marine, who had previously been a consultant for the CIA, began chatting up a boy in the hotel lounge. After learning that the youngster was 14 years old, “the conversation turned to oral sex with men and the appellant asked [the teen] if he had ever been interested in oral sex with men. He also told [the teen] that if the appellant or any of his male friends were aroused, they would have oral sex with one another,” according to legal documents. The boy attempted to change the subject, but the Marine moved closer to him, began “rubbing his [own] crotch area through his shorts,” and continued to talk to him “in graphic detail about sexual matters and techniques” before the youngster left the lounge. The Marine was later court-martialed for his actions and convicted of making a false official statement, as well as “engaging in indecent liberty with a child” — that is, [engaging](#) in an act meant to arouse or gratify sexual

desire while in a child's presence.

That same year, according to a Pentagon report, a noncommissioned officer committed a sexual assault on a female subordinate at an unnamed U.S. base in Djibouti (presumably Camp Lemonnier, the headquarters of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa). "Subject grabbed victim's head and forced her to continue having sexual intercourse with him," the report says. He received a nonjudicial punishment including a reduction in rank, a fine of half-pay for two months, 45 days of restriction, and 45 days of extra duty. The latter two punishments were later suspended and the perpetrator was, at the time the report was prepared, "being processed for administrative separation."

At an "unknown location" in Djibouti in 2011, an enlisted woman reported being raped by a fellow service member "while on watch." According to a synopsis prepared by the Department of Defense, that man "was not charged with any criminal violations in reference to the rape allegation against him. Victim pled guilty to failure to obey a lawful order and false official statement."

In a third case in Djibouti, an enlisted woman reported opening the door to her quarters only to be attacked. An unknown assailant "placed his left hand over her mouth and placed his right hand under her shirt and began to slide it up the side of her body." All leads were later deemed exhausted and no suspect was identified. According to Air Force documents obtained by *TomDispatch*, allegations also surfaced concerning an assault with intent to commit rape in Morocco, a forcible sodomy in Ethiopia, and possession of child pornography in Djibouti, all in 2012.

On July 22nd of that year, a group of Americans [traveled](#) to a private party in Djibouti attended by U.S. Ambassador Geeta Pasi and Major General Ralph Baker, the [commander](#) of a counterterrorism force in the Horn of Africa. Baker drank heavily, according to an AFRICOM senior policy adviser who sat with him in the backseat of a sport utility vehicle on the return trip to Camp Lemonnier. While two military personnel, one of them an agent of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS), sat just a few feet away, Baker "forced his hand between [the adviser's] legs and attempted to touch her vagina against her will," according to a classified criminal investigation file obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.

"I grabbed his hand and held it on the seat to try to prevent him from putting his hand deeper between my legs," she [told](#) an investigator. "He responded by smiling at me and saying, 'Cat got your tongue?' I was appalled about what he was doing to me and did not know what to say." She later reported the offense via the Department of Defense's Sexual Assault Hotline. According to a [report](#) in the *Washington Post*, "Baker was given an administrative punishment at the time of the incident as well as a letter of reprimand — usually a career-ending punishment." Demoted in rank to brigadier general, he was allowed to quietly retire in September 2013.

A Pentagon report on sexual assault lists allegations of three incidents in Djibouti in 2013 — one act of "[abusive sexual contact](#)" and two reports of "[wrongful sexual contact](#)." The report also details a case in which a member of the U.S. military reported that she and a group of friends had been out eating and drinking at a local establishment. Upon returning to her quarters at the base, one of her male companions asked to enter her room and she gave him permission. He then began to kiss her neck and shoulders. When she resisted, according to the report, "he grabbed her shorts and began to kiss and lick her vagina." That

man was later charged with rape, abusive sexual contact, and wrongful sexual contact. He was tried and acquitted.

The Pentagon has yet to issue its 2014 report on sexual assaults and AFRICOM has failed to release any statistics on its own, but given that military personnel fail to [report](#) most sexual crimes, whatever numbers may emerge will undoubtedly be drastic undercounts.

Sex, Drugs, and Guns

On the morning of April 10, 2010, a Navy investigator walked through the door of room 3092 at the Sarova Whitesands Beach Resort in Mombasa, Kenya. Two empty wine bottles sat in the trash can. Another was on the floor. There were remnants of feminine hygiene products on the bathroom countertop, Axe body spray in an armoire, unopened condoms on a table, and inside a desk drawer, a tan powder that he took to be “an illicit narcotic,” all of this according to an official report by that NCIS agent obtained by *TomDispatch* through the Freedom of Information Act.

Three days before, on April 7th, Sergeant [Roberto Diaz-Boria](#) of the Puerto Rico Army National Guard had been staying in this room. On leave from Manda Bay, Kenya — home of Camp Simba, a hush-hush military outpost in Africa — he had come to Mombasa to kick back. That night, along with a brother-in-arms, he ended up at Causerina, a nearby bar that locals said was a hotspot for drugs and prostitution. Diaz-Boria left Causerina with a “female companion,” according to official documents, paid the requisite fee for such guests at the hotel, and took her to his room. By morning, he was dead.

A news story released soon after by Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa stated that Diaz-Boria had died while “stationed” in Mombasa. The cause of death, the article noted, was “under investigation.” CJTF-HOA failed to respond to a request for additional information about the case, but an Army investigation later determined that the sergeant “accidentally died of multiple drug toxicity after drinking alcohol and using cocaine and heroin.” Where he obtained the drugs was never determined, but according to the summary of an interview with an NCIS agent, a close friend in his infantry unit did say that there were “rumors within the battalion about the easy access to very potent illegal narcotics in Manda Bay, Kenya.”

Kenya is hardly an anomaly. Criminal inquiries regarding illicit drug use also took place in Ethiopia in 2012 and Burkina Faso in 2013, while another investigation into distribution was conducted in Cameroon that same year, according to Air Force records obtained by *TomDispatch*. AFRICOM did not respond to questions concerning any of these investigations.

In late 2012, when I asked what U.S. personnel were up to in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, AFRICOM spokesman Eric Elliott replied that troops were “supporting humanitarian activities in the area.” Indeed, official documents and other sources [indicate](#) U.S. [personnel](#) have been [carrying out](#) aid [activities](#) in the region for years. But that wasn’t all they were doing.

The Lonely Planet guide [says](#) that the Samrat Hotel provides the best digs in town, with a “classy lobby” and “a good nightclub and restaurant.” The one drawback: “stiff mattresses.” That apparently didn’t affect the activities of at least nine of 19 U.S. military personnel from the 775th Engineer Detachment of the Tennessee Army National Guard. After an unidentified “local national female” was seen emerging from a “secured

communications room” in the hotel, a preliminary investigation was launched and found “military members of the unit allegedly routinely solicited prostitutes in the lobby of the hotel and later brought the prostitutes back to their assigned rooms or to the secured communications room,” according to documents obtained via FOIA request. A later report by Army agents determined that personnel from the 775th Engineer Detachment and the 415th Civil Affairs Battalion “individually engaged in sexual acts in exchange for money” at the hotel between July 1 and July 22, 2013. In the room of a staff sergeant, investigators also found what appeared to be [khat](#), a popular local narcotic that offers a hyperactive high marked by [aggressiveness](#) that ultimately leaves the user in a glassy-eyed daze.

A sworn statement by a medic who served in Dire Dawa that month — obtained by *TomDispatch* in a separate FOIA request — paints a picture of a debauched atmosphere of partying, local “girlfriends,” and a variety of sex acts. “Originally, before we departed to Ethiopia, I grabbed around 70 condoms. However, I was told that was not going to be enough,” said the medic, noting that it was his job to carry medical supplies. Instead, he brought 200. He confessed to obtaining a prostitute through the bartender at the Samrat Hotel and admitted to engaging in sex acts with another woman who, he said, later revealed herself to be a prostitute. He paid her the equivalent of \$60. Another service member showed him pictures of a “local national in his bed in his hotel room,” the medic told the NCIS agent. He continued:

“I know this girl is a prostitute because I pulled her from the club previously. The name of the club was ‘The Pom-Pom’... I had hooked up with this girl before [redacted name] so when he showed me the photo I recognized the girl. [Redacted name] stated how she had a nice booty and was good in bed... I want to say that [redacted name] told me he paid about 1,000 Birr (roughly \$30 US dollars), but I can’t recall exactly.”

Army investigation documents obtained by *TomDispatch* also indicate similar extracurricular activities by members of the 607th Air Control Squadron and the 422nd Communications Squadron in neighboring Djibouti. An inquiry by Army criminal investigators determined that there was probable cause to believe three noncommissioned officers “committed the offense of patronizing a prostitute” at an “off-base residence” in June 2013.

AFRICOM failed to respond to repeated requests for comment on or to provide further information about members of the command engaging in illicit sex. It was similarly nonresponsive when it came to criminal inquests into allegations of arson in South Africa, larceny in Burkina Faso, graft in Algeria, and drunk and disorderly conduct in Nigeria, among other alleged crimes. The command has kept quiet about violent incidents as well.

On April 19, 2013, for instance, something went terribly wrong in Manda Bay, Kenya. A specialist with the Kentucky Army National Guard, deployed at Camp Simba and reportedly upset by a posting he saw on Facebook, got drunk on bourbon whiskey — more than a fifth of [Jim Beam](#), according to witnesses — stole a 9mm pistol, and shot a superior officer. He would also point the pistol at a staff sergeant and a master sergeant and then barricade himself in his barracks room. A member of the Army’s Special Forces serving at the base told an NCIS agent what he saw when the soldier emerged from his quarters:

“He had a gun in his hand and he was waving it around with the barrel level. He was saying something to the effect of ‘Fuck you!’ or something like that. I heard the [redacted] say something like ‘put the gun down!’ a couple of times and then the [redacted] shot at the subject 2-3 times with his handgun.”

The drunken soldier was hit once in the leg and later surrendered. An investigation determined that the specialist had probably committed a host of offenses under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, including wrongful appropriation of government property, failure to obey an order, and aggravated assault, although a charge of attempted murder was deemed “unfounded.” The incident, detailed in previously classified documents, was never made public.

General Malfeasance

AFRICOM has certainly had its troubles, starting at the top, since it began overseeing the U.S. military [pivot to Africa](#). Its first chief, General William “Kip” Ward, who led the fledgling command from 2007 until 2011, was demoted after a 2012 investigation by the Department of Defense Inspector General’s office found he had committed a raft of misdeeds, such as using taxpayer-funded military aircraft for personal travel and spending lavishly on hotels.

During an 11-day trip to Washington, for example, he billed the government \$129,000 in expenses for his wife, 13 employees, and himself, but conducted official business on just two of those days. According to the Inspector General’s report, Ward also had AFRICOM personnel ferry his wife around and run errands for the two of them, including shopping for “candy and baby items, picking up flowers and books, delivering snacks, and acquiring tickets to sporting events.” He even accepted “complimentary meals and Broadway show tickets” from a “prohibited source with multiple [Department of Defense] contracts.”

Ward was [ordered](#) to repay the government \$82,000 and busted down from four stars to three, which will cost him about \$30,000 yearly in retirement pay. He’ll now *only* receive \$208,802 annually. An AFRICOM webpage [devoted](#) to the highlights of Ward’s career mentions nothing of his transgressions, demotion, or punishment. The only clue to all of this is his official photo. In it, he’s sporting four stars while his bio states that “Ward retired at the rank of Lieutenant General in November 2012.”

Ward’s wasteful ways became major news, but the story of his malfeasance has been the exception. For every SUV that plunged off a bridge or general who was busted down for misbehavior, how many other AFRICOM sexual assaults, shootings, and prostitution scandals remain unknown?

For years, as U.S. military personnel moved into Africa in ever-increasing numbers, AFRICOM has effectively downplayed, disguised, or covered-up almost every aspect of its operations, from the locations of its [troop deployments](#) to those of its [expanding](#) string of [outposts](#). Not surprisingly, it’s done the same when it comes to misdeeds by members of the command and continues to ignore questions surrounding crimes and alleged misconduct by its personnel, refusing even to answer emails or phone calls about them. With taxpayer money covering the salaries of lawbreakers and the men and women who investigate them, with America’s sons dying after drink and drug binges and its daughters assaulted and sexually abused while deployed, the American people deserve answers when it comes to the conduct of U.S. forces in Africa. Personally, I remain eager to hear AFRICOM’s side of the story, should Benjamin Benson ever be in the mood to return my calls.

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