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LETTER DATED 7 MAY 1979 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF BENIN
TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

On instructions from my Government, I have the honour to transmit to you herewith a copy of a press release dated 4 April 1979 and an article by Jon Bradshaw concerning the French mercenary Bob Denard, alias Colonel Maurin, alias Gilbert Bourgeaud.

Jon Bradshaw's article, which appeared in the 27 March 1979 issue of Esquire magazine, throws new light on the sinister career of this mercenary who led the armed aggression of Sunday, 16 January 1977, against the People's Republic of Benin.

In the context of the complaint by Benin, which is still before the Security Council, I have the honour to request that the press release, together with the article by Jon Bradshaw, be issued as a Security Council document.

(Signed) Thomas S. BOYA

Annex I

Press release dated 4 April 1979 of the Permanent Mission of
the People's Republic of Benin

The sinister career of a French mercenary who is on the wanted list in Africa: Gilbert Bourgeaud, alias Colonel Maurin, alias Bob Denard.

On 16 January 1977, the people of Benin were the victims of an act of aggression carried out by a gang of mercenaries which was armed to the teeth and led by a French mercenary known as Colonel Maurin, alias Gilbert Bourgeaud, alias Bob Denard.

The humiliating defeat of these mercenaries of international imperialism and their utter rout continue to provide numerous experts with material for analysis and research. Major articles have been published on the subject in many newspapers throughout the world.

Although it is in a sense an apologia for mercenaries, Jon Bradshaw's article, which appeared in the 27 March 1979 issue of Esquire magazine, throws new light on the criminal career of Bob Denard, the hired killer of international imperialism.

Jon Bradshaw, who has gathered many startling and significant details about the life of Bob Denard, the creature and instrument of international imperialism in its sinister design for colonial reconquest and destabilization of progressive and anti-imperialist régimes in Africa, provides crucial facts on which to reflect. With the flagrant collusion of Western imperialist and colonialist circles, Bob Denard is being used to perpetrate crimes against the oppressed peoples of Africa on behalf of the Western secret services.

All peoples who cherish peace and justice must be made fully aware of the machinations of Bob Denard, the French mercenary and bootlicker of imperialism and colonialism, who is on the wanted list in Benin for his odious crimes against our peaceable people.

Attached is a photocopy of the full text of Jon Bradshaw's article, as published in Esquire magazine.

Victory for the people,

Death to the mercenaries of imperialism,

Prepared for the Revolution, the struggle continues.

Annex II

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

Robert Denard is a French mercenary. Last year, he invaded the Comoro Islands, Off Africa, and took charge . . .

by Jon Bradshaw *

There was little hope for him this time. He had come to the end. His luck had gone. And worse, he would soon be fifty. Robert Denard sat in the cluttered office of his Citroën sales and service station. Outside, the heavy traffic beat down the main road to Bordeaux. He stroked his moustache and dreamed, waiting for his manager to present the monthly billings.

Over the years, Denard had fought in seven separate wars as a professional soldier, or, as the papers put it, a mercenary, one of *les affreux*—the terrible ones. He was known throughout black Africa as Le Colonel. He had taken five wounds. He walked with a limp. He suffered from recurrent bouts of malaria. He had a wife, a light-skinned Congolese. He had a child. He maintained secret bank accounts in Gabon, Geneva, and Luxembourg. He owned a successful Citroën station. But what was that? It wasn't much. And he had not expected to end his days in trade.

Denard fiddled with the bracelet of elephant hair he always wore round his right wrist. He was a handsome man—a Gascon with a hooked nose, cropped brown hair graying at the sides, blue eyes that seemed always still and cold. Denard was what the French call a *baroudeur*, an adventurer. He believed that men are made by circumstances; he himself had come of age during the German occupation of Paris. After that, there had always been war for him. He had been a marine gunner in Vietnam, a policeman in Morocco, a legionnaire in Algeria, a mercenary in Yemen and the Congo. *La guerre c'est mon métier*, he had long been fond of saying. It seemed mere bluster to him now.

But he remembered it all so well. Even here in Bordeaux, the Congo was always with him. It was in the Congo that he had assumed his first command and acquired a reputation for cold-blooded bravery. During the battle at Kolwezi against a superior United Nations force, he and his little band of mercenaries resisted for days, inflicting heavy casualties, before slipping across the border into Angola. Later, in 1966, they held Stanleyville against the mutinous Katangese, then drove the rebels from the city and destroyed them in Maniema.

Each skirmish, each ambush and attack, was clear to him—

Jon Bradshaw is a contributing editor of Esquire Fortnightly. His latest book is Fast Company, an account of six gamblers.

how they drove through the damp weight of the jungle in their Jeeps, the heavy machine gun mounted on the back, how they swooped into enemy villages, their morale so high that they attacked while standing up in their Jeeps. He could still hear the crash of the mortars, the machine gun and automatic rifle fire. He could still see the oncoming waves of screaming Katangese, drugged on *chanvre*, which gave them, they believed, the *dawa*, or magic, that enabled bullets to pass through them harmlessly; and afterward, when the battle was done, the piles of dead black bodies along the jungle road, so thick at times that the Jeeps were unable to pass until the bodies were heaved into the bush. He had killed . . . he could no longer remember how many men he had killed.

In those days he had always had his *baraka*—an Arabic word denoting luck. *Baraka*, in fact, was more than luck; it was a kind of invincibility. He believed in it with the odd and obstinate faith of the superstitious. And so did his men, the little group of thirty or forty mercenaries whom he had trained in the Congo, taken to the war in Yemen, and brought back to the Congo again. They believed he had a great vein of it, that it was powerful not only for him but for them, and that it would never run dry. But in July of 1967, while inspecting his troops entrenched along the Congo River, he was hit in the head by a bullet. He was flown in a stolen DC-3 to Rhodesia for an operation. The bullet was removed, but he was partially paralyzed in the right leg, and for months thereafter, he walked with a cane.

By then, the war in the Congo was nearly over. In November of 1967, only partially recovered and still using a cane, he and sixteen of his men crossed into the Congo from Angola in order to support the Belgian mercenary Black Jean Schramme's mutiny against the Congolese government. Having no transport, they came into the Congo on bicycles. In a series of sudden ambushes, they lost four men and were forced once more to retreat into Angola. He was finished, his Congo days ending in defeat and ignominy. This was made quite clear to him that fall. Hearing that there would be clandestine but official French support for a mercenary venture in the recent outbreak of war in Biafra, he offered his services; but his reputation was tarnished and despite his intrigues he was rejected as its potential leader. It was the final blow, he believed at the time, and he withdrew to Bordeaux.

Since late 1967, Denard had been one of the trusted agents of Jacques Foccart, then the French Republican presidency's secretary-general in charge of African and Madagascan affairs. Appointed to this position by President De Gaulle in 1961, Foccart quickly became the *éminence grise* of French covert operations in

* Article appearing in Esquire, issue of 27 March 1979.

Africa. Called Le Phoque (the seal), Foccart had been one of the leaders of the Gaullist Service d'Action Civique (SAC), whose specialty was dirty tricks against left-wing parties in France. Now, independent of the official services, Foccart took Africa as his fief.

In the early Sixties, at a time when African nations were becoming independent, the Gaullist regime backed those African politicians who were favorable to or dependent on France—particularly in their former colonies. Independence was necessary, acceptable even, but De Gaulle, Foccart, and Denard himself were men who continued to believe in the efficacy of the French Empire. To that end, France used its secret services to combat threats to its interests by radical African political organizations in their former colonies. Thus, whenever there were secessionist movements or important mineral or petroleum resources in question, Foccart and, hence, Denard were actively engaged. Denard was Foccart's pawn, and he was moved about Africa accordingly.

Foccart's activities in Africa were centered in Gabon. Foccart and the Gabonese president Albert Bongo had long been allies. Foccart helped Bongo foment a military coup in February of 1964. He was instrumental in the death of Léon Mba, Bongo's chief political opponent, who was kidnapped while leaving a movie house in Libreville in 1968 and never seen again. It was said that Denard killed Mba personally, slashing him to pieces with a machete.

In late 1967, using the pseudonym Colonel Gilbert Bourgeaud (although he occasionally used the name Colonel Jean Maurin), Denard had been engaged by President Albert Bongo as a technical adviser and instructor of the palace guard. His real role, however, was to help form a group called the Foreign Intervention Collective. The group was composed of European and African mercenaries and was trained in counter-urban guerrilla warfare and antiterrorism. During the late Sixties and early Seventies, Denard spent most of his time in Gabon. With the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974, Jacques Foccart fell into political disgrace "officially." He continued, however, to receive African leaders in Paris and was often their guest in Africa. More important, the network he founded in Africa is still in operation. It comprises some 3,000 men and is known only as *les gars de Foccart*—Foccart's guys. In Africa, the organization is as powerful as SDECE (Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre Espionnage)—the French CIA.

In July of 1975, Denard received new marching orders, this time to the Comoro Islands. The Comoros, lying in the Indian Ocean between Madagascar and Mozambique, were the poorest of France's dependencies. The four small islands have a population of some 370,000 Muslims of mixed African and Arab descent. They survive for the most part on the exportation of vanilla beans, cloves, a little copra, and a curious plant called the ylang-ylang, essential to the making of many French perfumes. A poor and inauspicious place, the Comoros have a per capita income of under \$153 a year. The islands, however, were of strategic importance to France, since they lay at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel, through which all the supertankers came from the Persian Gulf bearing oil round the Cape of Good Hope to Western capitals.

On July 6, 1975, the Comoran parliament declared unilateral independence and appointed Ahmed Abdallah as president, thereby ending 132 years of French rule. Nearly a month later, Denard and seven mercenaries arrived by night in the Comoros, captured Ahmed Abdallah, and installed Ali Soilih, the leader of the opposition, as the new Comoran president. Ahmed Abdallah was exiled to France. Denard remained to train the 1,600-man Comoran army. He spent some two months in the Comoros, and

gradually he came to look on the islands as his own kingdom. He was not king, of course, but it was he, Denard, who had made the king. Those were rapturous days for him. Ali Soilih followed orders. Denard soldiered; he swam and lay in the sun and consorted with several of the local girls. At last, everything worked. The Comoran coup had restored his confidence and he believed that nothing would ever deter him again. That autumn he received a new assignment, and when he left for Gabon, he promised himself that one day he would return.

During the next few months, he remained in Africa running invidious errands for Jacques Foccart and the CIA. In the fall of 1975, he recruited thirty mercenaries to support President Mobutu of Zaire's invasion of oil-rich Cabinda. The invasion failed. In early 1976, he was paid \$500,000 by the CIA to recruit twenty mercenaries to support the right-wing UNITA forces during the Angolan war. The mercenaries failed to complete their six-month contract. Denard was vexed, but these were minor setbacks and he continued to believe that his *baraka* was as strong as ever.

On Sunday morning, January 16, 1977, Denard and ninety-one mercenaries were aboard a four-engine, unmarked DC-7 en route from Libreville, in Gabon, to Cotonou, in Benin, a small "Marxist-Leninist" republic on the western coast of Africa. The mercenaries were called Force OMEGA, and Denard, their leader, was traveling under his usual pseudonym of Colonel Gilbert Bourgeaud. The group, trained at Benguerir, a military base near Marrakech, in Morocco, had flown the day before from Morocco to Gabon.

Force OMEGA's objective in Benin was "to eliminate the present regime, to install the new team from the Front for the Liberation and Rehabilitation of Dahomey [Benin] and to seize and neutralize the President." Denard reckoned the coup d'état would take a maximum of three hours. With Denard was Gratien Pognon, Benin's former ambassador to Brussels and a longtime agent of SDECE. Pognon was to be Benin's new president. He carried a copy of his victory speech inside his safari jacket. The speech began: "Children of Dahomey, arise. The tyrant is no more." At seven o'clock that morning—because of a breakdown in Gabon, they were already an hour late—the old DC-7 flew in low over the Bight of Benin and landed at the small airport in Cotonou.

As the plane taxied round, Denard saw a tank move slowly up the airstrip toward them. The plane wheeled and stopped. Chutes were extended from the doors through which the mercenaries slid to the ground. An 81-mm mortar was set up near the starboard wing, and they knocked out the tank on the second shot. Fifteen minutes later, the airport was theirs. There were only five soldiers on duty, three of whom were shot. The other two and seven airport technicians were taken hostage. Denard set up his staff headquarters in the main terminal and dispatched his men in three separate units to the presidential palace, two and a half kilometers away.

From the roofs of the Ministry of the Interior and a five-story apartment building, the mercenaries began to shell the palace with 81-mm mortars. One of the shells hit the palace roof just above the president's bed, but he had spent the night in his private residence five kilometers away. The mercenaries' fire was returned by the palace guard, who swiftly grouped on the palace roof. The firing from the palace was fierce and accurate, and the mercenaries were unable to advance. Three hours later, supported by 200 troops from the nearby army camp, the palace guard counterattacked, and slowly the surprised mercenaries were forced to retreat.

Only minutes later, it became a rout. Dozens of civilians wielding machetes joined the advancing soldiers. The mercenaries broke and ran for the airport, shooting haphazardly over their shoulders as they went. At the airport, Denard was stunned

Leaving the terminal building, he saw his men in full flight and beyond them the oncoming Beninese. Without thinking, and clutching his bad leg, he joined them in their dash for the plane. The DC-7 taxied round and moved slowly up the airstrip, the mercenaries running alongside until one by one they were dragged aboard. Two mercenaries were killed and a young Belgian mercenary was shot in the arm; it was later amputated.

Somehow, the DC-7 managed to take off without receiving a direct hit. Sitting in the back of the plane, Denard could see the Beninese soldiers below jumping up and down and brandishing their rifles in the air. It was only later he discovered that in their panic, they had left behind their mortars and machine guns and a 300-watt radio transmitter and that he had forgotten his briefcase containing photographs of the mercenaries, their real names, addresses, and bank accounts, and detailed plans for the coup d'etat. He was sick. He had never felt so sick.

It had been a terrible fiasco. His *baraka* had finally gone. In the next few months, many of his men who had been loyal for years deserted him for other campaigns and other commanders. In 1977, there were wars enough to keep them occupied. Some went to Rhodesia, others to Somalia and Saudi Arabia, and others still to Thailand and Chad. Denard returned to Bordeaux.

Now, sitting in the cluttered office of his Citroën station, he recounted the grim litany of his defeats and waited for his manager to present the monthly billings. Once there had been heroics; now there were only Citroëns. When he finished work at five o'clock, he drove the sixty kilometers to his home in the little village of Lesparre. Over dinner, his wife said he had had an urgent call from Paris that afternoon. Denard said he did not believe in urgency anymore.

II

Ali Soilih liked being head of state. And despite his socialist beliefs, he liked to think of himself as king, the kind of king who would guide his subjects down the difficult road of five-year plans and proletarian reforms with monarchic zeal. Ah, to be king. Even if one's kingdom was the Comoro Islands—four lumps of flotsam in the inaccessible sea.

Night after night he sat by the big window in the presidential palace and looked down on the lights of what the local brochures called "the perfumed isles." He lighted his pipe filled with *bange*, the local marijuana, and dreamed of new edicts, decrees, and constitutional reforms he might or might not put into effect the following day. Occasionally, he thought of Robert Denard. After all, without Denard, he would not now hold this high position. Ali Soilih was glad Denard had come to the Comoros; he was even more glad he'd gone. A useful man, Denard, but one without heart or politics. A troublemaker.

From the palace window, Ali Soilih could see the little village where he was born. He had lived in that village for sixteen years. He had gone to school, he had gone regularly to the mosque, he learned his Koran, and on weekends he worked his father's onion patch. At sixteen, he went to Madagascar to attend an agricultural college. At twenty-three, he studied in Paris for a year on a scholarship; he was supposed to be studying agronomy, but he spent his time unraveling the mysteries of economics and socialism. He did not pass his examinations, but back in the Comoros, the title of engineer of agronomy was given to him anyway. He moved into the capital of Moroni. Against his mother's wishes he entered politics. His mother believed that men who made politics in Africa ended up in prison. He bought a bicycle, married, and fathered two children. He had few prospects, but he was awash with plans.

By 1970, Ali Soilih was leader of the opposition—opposing the conservative party of Ahmed Abdallah. When unilateral independence was declared in 1975, Ali, who had always advocated closer ties with France, was approached by agents of Jacques Foccart. They believed Ali would make a more sympathetic head of state. Ali Soilih thought so too. Four weeks later, Robert Denard and his mercenaries arrived in the Comoros. Following the coup d'etat, Ali Soilih, now forty, plump, and bald, was driven up the hill to the palace.

No one in the Comoros can now recall just when the benign agronomist began to change, to change to such a degree that in less than two years his more irreverent critics referred to him as "the madman of Moroni." There had been early indications. Despite a pressing need for sugar, rice, and beets in the Comoros, on his third day as head of state, Ali Soilih ordered 10,000 batons from Paris in order to keep his unruly subjects in line. Some months later, he banished his wife from the palace, replacing her with three teenage girls. Ali's favorite was a pretty girl called Mazna, from Madagascar, who had worked as a maid in a local hotel. After Mazna moved into the palace, the sounds of revelry could be heard as far away as Ali's village. Ali and the three girls smoked *bange*, drank brandy, and watched American movies far into the night. In time, the early-morning cabinet meetings were postponed till noon.

During the late afternoons, Ali Soilih took mint tea on the palace porch while he issued solemn radical decrees designed to change the mentality of the people from colonial feudal attitudes to progressive socialist ones. He began by nationalizing everything from the taxis to the little fishing pirogues. He lowered the voting age to fourteen and promoted semiliterate teenagers to positions of power, in some cases as junior ministers. He became particularly peeved with the French. After more than 130 years of rule, they'd left no architecture, few schools, and no real hospitals. All they had done, Ali Soilih believed, was manipulate and exploit his people. During his first year in office, Ali fired all 3,500 civil servants and burned more than a century of French administrative records in the town square. By 1978, everything French had been abolished except the language and the little bakery, which continued to produce 500 baguettes a day.

France retaliated by cutting off its \$18-million annual aid program. And after that, everything went wrong. The island was hit with a cholera epidemic. The fishermen found no fish. Karthala, the volcano that rises nearly 8,000 feet above Grand Comoro, erupted for the first time since 1918. That first year, the rainy season never came. The omens were not auspicious.

But the cultural revolution was now in full flood. Although Ali Soilih smoked *bange* regularly, he forbade its use in the islands. He created the Commando Moisé, an elite young troop modeled on the Red Guard, who wore red shirts and scarves and roamed the streets of Moroni bullying the populace. Since Ali had recently become an atheist, the traditional wedding feasts were banned and Muslim women were no longer permitted to wear veils. "You cannot wear a veil," said Ali Soilih, "and drive a tractor too"—overlooking the fact that there were no tractors on the island.

During his second year of rule, Ali Soilih installed loudspeakers in the more important villages so that his subjects would be forced to hear his complicated discourses. He was very fond of the Comoran national anthem; thus, whenever it was played through loudspeakers, his subjects, even those who were driving cars, had to come to prompt attention. To disobey was a punishable offense. Ali then decided that his name must be praised along with Allah's in all the island mosques. The grand mufti grudgingly assented, but in the little fishing village of Iconi, the righteous refused to be intimidated. Ali Soilih sent in his troops. Twelve of the villagers were killed, and more than a hundred were wounded or maimed.

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In January of 1978, Ali Soilih's *moirlimou*, his witch doctor, had a clear and startling vision. The next morning, he hurried to the palace and informed Ali that before six moons passed, he would be dragged from his throne by a man with a dog. Ali Soilih, never one to trifle with fate, dispatched his soldiers to the four corners of his kingdom, ordering them to murder all the dogs. The soldiers either killed them outright with clubs or tied

the animals to the backs of Land Rovers and dragged them to death in the streets. No one knew just how many dogs were killed; some say 50, others 60,000, but not a single dog remained.

Ali Soilih had now been in power nearly thirty-four months. The kingdom was destitute, but Ali believed the wheels of government ran smoothly. He was rarely seen anymore, often not leaving the palace for months at a time. He played with his girls, he issued new decrees, and he told his teenage ministers that the way had been prepared, his vision was keen, unclouded.

On Saturday night, May 13, 1978, Ali Soilih paid an unexpected visit to the Mosque de Vendredi. Walking into the central room of prayer without having taken off his shoes, he instructed the grand mufti to summon Allah immediately. This proved, on such short notice, to be impossible. Ali then told the grand mufti to summon Ali Soilih. The grand mufti seemed perplexed. Laughing, Ali Soilih said, "You see, I am here already I exist. I am not a fantasy."

Having given this irrefutable proof, he drove back up the hill to the palace. He smoked a pipe and spent the rest of the evening drinking brandy with an importer of religious bric-a-brac. At some point, long after midnight, Ali Soilih fell into a contented sleep in the arms of Mazna, his favorite concubine.

III

He could not put the urgent call from his mind, and when dinner was over, Denard rang Paris immediately. His caller was Ahmed Abdallah, the ex-Comoran president whom Denard had deposed nearly two years before. Now, in March of 1977, Abdallah suggested that Denard come to Paris as soon as possible. He had a proposition, one he believed Denard would find both interesting and lucrative. They agreed to meet at Abdallah's apartment in the sixteenth arrondissement the next afternoon.

After two years in exile, Ahmed Abdallah wanted his country returned to him. When asked why he had sought out Robert Denard, the very man who had taken the Comoros from him, Abdallah explained that if one had always used the same doctor and one's children fell ill again, why look for a different one? And besides, coup d'etats were Denard's métier.

In Paris, the two men reached a swift and amicable agreement. They knew the French secret services would not oppose their scheme; indeed, Jacques Foccart had already assured Denard of this. Denard calculated that it would take a year to make the necessary preparations and the cost would be in the range of \$1,500,000. Then Denard did a curious thing, something no mercenary, certainly, had done before. He explained that he wanted a share in the action, that he was prepared to mortgage his Citroën sales and service station, which, he reckoned, was worth some \$700,000. Abdallah agreed and pointed out that additional funds could be expected from Mohammed Ahmed, his ex-co-president. Abdallah himself would mortgage his two Paris apartments. Between the three backers there would be funds enough to topple Ali Soilih.

The project pleased Denard. He did not tell Abdallah, but should the coup d'etat be successful, he had no intention of leaving the Comoros again. He was, he knew, too old for war; he had lost the taste for it. He wanted to retire, preferably somewhere in Africa, and now, quite by chance, a sanctuary had been selected. His offer to participate in the cost of the coup had been sincere. But Denard also knew that his personal expenditures would be returned once he and his men took the Comoran national treasury. He would make careful plans. This time, there would be no tanks, no waiting armies when he arrived. He would seize the little kingdom and stay on, perhaps as king, at the very least as commandant.

The two men drew up a formal contract that included a detailed budget. Abdallah agreed to pay Denard and his "technicians" in American dollars. They would receive their payments in three parts—a preoperational advance, a postoperational payment following the success of the coup, and the final payment when the technicians departed. Abdallah was anxious to begin. His nine children and many of his friends and relatives had been imprisoned by Ali Soilih. He did not envisage this venture as a coup d'etat but as a liberation.

Denard began his preparations that very week. He called two mercenaries who, despite his recent reversals, had remained loyal to him—Captain Philippe Gérard and Major Guy Cardinal. Both men had accompanied him on the disastrous journey to Benin. Denard reckoned he would require a force of fifty men. He decided to take out advertisements in the newspapers—*Le Figaro*

in Paris and seven or eight provincial papers. Advertising is not a sound method of recruiting men. It attracts ex-convicts, professional toughs, and the unemployed. But the word had already gone out to the bars mercenaries normally frequented—*Le Paris*, *La Taverne d'Alsace*, and *Le Lord Byron*, off the Champs Elysées, and *Le Temps Perdu*, in St-Germain—and there had been few responses. So the advertisement was necessary. The ad was simple, stating that a foreign company required men with excellent military backgrounds to help survey and exploit oil resources abroad. The risks were minimal, the pay was good, about \$4,000 for two months' work. The advertisement was repeated twice and ran for a week each time in May of 1977.

More than a thousand men answered the ad. The interviews were conducted in Paris, Lyons, and Marseilles, and the candidates were graded according to classifications of good, average, and unacceptable. Denard refused to accept any man whose politics were left of center. Their military backgrounds had to be excellent and preferably recent. His ideal recruit was a fit man of thirty who had seen action as a parachutist. Denard did not allow for the smallest compromise, acting in strict accordance with his favorite dictum: An army is like a clock; if one tiny thing goes wrong, everything else goes haywire.

By late autumn, Denard had selected forty-five technicians. The thirty-nine Frenchmen, one German, and five Belgians would compose his main assault force. They had seen action in such places as the Congo, Lebanon, Somalia, Biafra, Algeria, Angola, Cabinda, Benin, Vietnam, the Sudan, Rhodesia, and Chad. With such men, Denard felt he might have captured Carcassonne.

His original plan was to travel to the Comoros by plane. But planes were expensive and difficult to acquire. Few countries would permit fifty mercenaries to leave their soil for an unknown destination. And, more important, he had not forgotten Benin. He decided to go by boat.

He recalled Lagengete Beach in the Comoros. The beach, about one and a half kilometers north of Moroni, lay near the foot of the palace road. There were no houses on it, and the bay was wide and deep. It was the perfect landing place. He decided

against chartering a boat, since that would require the trust and assistance of a strange captain and crew. No, he would have to buy a seaworthy boat, one that was normally at sea for long periods of time. That autumn, he visited his old friend Commandant Pierre Guillaumat.

Guillaumat, a former legionnaire in the OAS, was known as Le Crabe-Tambour. A film of his exploits achieved a minor success in Paris in 1977. But that was all behind him now. Guillaumat now operated a large commercial maritime business in Paris with drilling interests in offshore oil. The two men talked, and Guillaumat assured Denard he would find a suitable vessel in time.

In September, Guillaumat took Denard to Brest, on the Brittany coast, and showed him the prospective vessel—a thirty-year-old blue *chalutier*, or trawler. It was called the *Athenée*. The trawler was used for long-distance fishing expeditions, sailing as far as the Iles de Désolation, or Kerguelen, as it was known, in the southern Indian Ocean. Her papers were in order. She was registered in Brittany and she was for sale for \$70,000. She would need to be modified to accommodate the forty-six mercenaries, but Denard was satisfied. Guillaumat arranged to purchase the trawler through his company and contrived to give it a legitimate mission: He acquired a contract with an Argentinian firm of oil speculators which stated that the *Athenée* would be engaged in research for drilling oil off the shores of Argentina.

Meanwhile, Denard and his two senior officers set about acquiring other supplies. They bought twelve magnesium flares, four pairs of night binoculars, and four powerful walkie-talkies. In Paris, Denard purchased three inflatable rubber landing craft—a black commando Zodiac and two green Sillingers with fifty-horsepower Johnson motors and rubber mufflers. These little boats would transport the mercenaries from the *Athenée* to the beach.

At a smart Right Bank sporting goods store, Guy Cardinal bought the weapons the assault team would require. Denard had decided against elaborate weaponry. His plan of attack was based on two simple axioms he had learned in the Congo ten years before: One, African soldiers have a fear of fighting in the dark, and two, surprise. They would therefore attack at night, and the weapons would be accurate and loud. To that end, Cardinal purchased fifty shotguns—twenty-five Remington Brushmaster twelve-gauge sawed-off shotguns and twenty-five Baretta twelve-gauge gas automatic shotguns. He also bought four Winchester .458s, normally used for hunting elephants. Because the guns were being exported, they were placed in bond until they left the country.

On Friday morning, March 25, having successfully cleared customs and immigration, the *Athenée* slipped from her berth in Brest and moved out into the Goulet channel. An hour later, she veered south into the Atlantic Ocean. Only then did Denard send a coded message to Ahmed Abdallah in Paris saying they had cleared port and were on their way. On board with Denard were twenty mercenaries in civilian dress. One of them, René, would act as cook. At the last minute, René decided to bring along his pet Belgian Alsatian, Raki. Despite the bad weather, the dog prowled the bow of the boat and barked at scavenging sea gulls.

The *Athenée* headed south for Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands. There she would take aboard additional supplies and the remaining twenty-six mercenaries—posing as seamen and traveling under their own passports. Two days out into the North Atlantic, the *Athenée* encountered heavy gales. It took almost a week to reach Las Palmas, where she arrived on the night of March 31.

The *Athenée* remained in Las Palmas for fifteen days, repairing damage to the steering and the hull and taking aboard supplies

for a voyage of three months. It would not take nearly that long to reach the Comoros, but Denard wanted extra supplies in the event his mission failed and he was forced to retreat to some distant port. A washing machine was installed, and food and medical supplies; extra rations of cigarettes and twenty cases of wine were brought aboard. Among the supplies were twenty-four bottles of Dom Pérignon to celebrate what the mercenaries hoped would be a triumphant coup d'état. Because Las Palmas is an international port with heavy shipping traffic and regular crew changes, the other twenty-six mercenaries had no difficulty coming aboard unnoticed. On April 15, three hours after the last mercenary had boarded, the *Athenée* set sail for Argentina.

There was little or nothing to do at sea. A few of the mercenaries attempted to fish but had no luck. They erected a large tent in the trawler's stern to protect themselves from the African sun and from passing planes and ships. There they did exercises, jumped rope, and boxed to keep in shape. On the second night at sea, Denard gathered the men below deck and, for the first time, outlined their mission. Producing detailed maps and photographs of Grand Comoro, he carefully explained each man's task and target.

Ten days out of Las Palmas, at about 25 degrees latitude in the south, the *Athenée* changed course. Instead of heading west toward Argentina, she veered southeast toward the Cape of Good Hope. There was much rough weather round the Cape, and most of the mercenaries suffered mal de mer.

In the southern straits of the Mozambique Channel, the landing craft were brought on deck and inflated. The men were issued weapons, though they were not tested for fear of attracting attention. There were just two days remaining before they reached the target area. It had been a twenty-eight-day voyage, and the men were eager to get ashore.

On Saturday, May 13, just before two o'clock in the morning, the *Athenée* cut her engines about two and a half kilometers off Moroni. None of them had been able to sleep that night. At nine o'clock, they had eaten a light dinner. Two days before, Denard had forbidden the drinking of wine. He went over the maps and the photographs with his squad leaders again. He explained that if anything went wrong, they should be back on board before sunrise so that they could put to sea before they were seen. It was understood that the dead and the seriously wounded would be left behind. Putting away the maps, Denard told them that if they performed their tasks precisely as instructed, they would take the Comoros by dawn. He wished them well, smiled, began to say something else, broke off, and limped from the room. The mercenaries sat at the tables and smoked in silence. After midnight, they gathered on the port deck, watching the dark shape of the island coming closer and closer. The *Athenée*'s portholes were blacked out, and the only visible lights were the three little beacons at the end of the quay in Moroni harbor. Denard looked toward the shore and thought of Benin.

It was a dark night. There was no moon. The weather was good, and the day was expected to be sunny and dry. The assault equipment had been stowed on deck before sundown. The forty-six men waited impatiently in black battle dress and blue woolen caps pulled down tightly round their heads. Each of them carried a canvas bag filled with medical supplies and ammunition—a hundred rounds per man. The mercenaries were divided into three groups, each group leader carrying flares and a walkie-talkie. The flares would not be used unless the walkie-talkies failed to work—one flare signaling success, two for limited resistance, and three for immediate retreat.

No one had spoken for more than an hour now. At two

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o'clock, the three assault craft were eased into the sea and the mercenaries slipped over the side—about fifteen men to a boat. The boats turned and glided toward the shore in single file so that in the event of an attack from the beach, only the lead boat would be hit. Almost immediately, they went off course and had to adjust their direction. Ten minutes later, over the soft hum of the muffled motors, Denard could hear the waves breaking on Lagengete Beach, and beyond he could just make out the massive shape of Karthala, the volcano, in the sky. He was almost home.

With Denard in the lead Zodiac were the four members of his shock team, the only mercenaries wearing blackface. Approaching the beach, they jumped overboard, waded ashore, and then, fanning out, sprinted in haphazard patterns across the beach looking for opposition. There was no one in the old Lagengete bar, which had been closed and shuttered for several years. Nor was there anyone in the little white mosque on the other side of the shore road. The team leader returned to the beach and waved the assault craft in. The mercenaries were on the beach and in position by two-thirty in the morning.

It was very quiet. One of the mercenaries ran across the beach road and cut the telephone wires to the palace. The men then split up into their respective teams. Eleven men led by Denard were to attack the palace. The second team of twenty-two men turned north up the shore road to Camp Voidjou, the main army barracks some three miles away. Five mercenaries were positioned at the crossroads of the palace and shore roads to intercept passing cars or pedestrians. Three mercenaries were left to guard the assault craft while two of the others remained aboard the *Athenée*.

The palace was about a mile up the steep hill. Denard led the way; the other men strung out in single file behind him. Because of his bad leg, Denard found the climb difficult, and he knew he was slowing down his men. About halfway up the hill, they encountered a drunken housekeeper and ordered him to return to his home. Blubbing, the man stumbled into the bush at the side of the road.

Just below the palace, round a curve in the road, was the gendarmerie. There were two sentries stationed outside, one of whom was asleep. As the mercenaries neared the main gate, a flurry of shots rang out from the sentry box, but none of the mercenaries was hit. Four of the mercenaries emptied their shotguns and missed both guards. The sleeping sentry awoke and aimed his Koleshnikov rifle at Captain Gérard, but the gun jammed and the mercenary gunned him down. The other sentry turned and ran, but he was shot before he reached the gendarmerie gate.

Now the five mercenaries, waiting below at the crossroads, raced up the hill. They guarded the gendarmerie while Denard and his team continued up the hill to the palace. As they reached the second curve in the road, they heard a car coming slowly down the hill. Soon, an old Citroën appeared with its lights extinguished. Denard ordered the car to stop, but it continued to move toward them. Denard opened fire, blowing in the windshield; the Citroën veered off the road and struck a tree. There was only one passenger, the driver, and he was dead. It was not until the next day that Denard learned that he was Ali Soilih's chief torturer. They continued to climb the hill.

Round the final curve in the road was the palace. It was completely unguarded, and the upstairs rooms were alight. The twelve mercenaries fanned across the open ground and burst in through the main door. Denard was the first to enter the palace's main reception room, on the second floor. There, sitting on one of the sofas, was Ali Soilih. He was fully dressed. A young, half-naked girl cowered on either side of him. The head of state had been asleep but hearing shots had awoken, dressed, and waited. There was little point in resistance; his two main battalions were on the distant island of Anjouan, and on the advice of one of his

generals, he had reduced the palace guard the week before. Suspecting a ruse, Denard waved his gun round the room, but there was no one there except Ali and the two girls. Denard pointed his gun at Ali. "Do you remember me?" he said. "Yes," said the president. "You were the only man who could have done this to me."

Just after three o'clock in the morning, the loud clatter of repeated rapid fire was heard from the direction of Camp Voidjou. Twenty-two mercenaries had attacked the army barracks, meeting only limited resistance. The guards had been surprised and frightened. Six of them were killed in the first assault. From inside the barracks there had been sporadic fire, which stopped when Major Guy Cardinal warned the soldiers that if they did not come out he would turn the flamethrower on them. The major did not have a flamethrower, and moments later some forty Comoran troops surrendered. The mercenaries did not lose a single man. Shortly after four o'clock, Captain Gérard set off a single flare so that his confederates aboard the *Athenée* would know the mission had been accomplished successfully.

The mercenaries now controlled the palace, the gendarmerie, and Camp Voidjou. They had seized the cable and wireless offices in the town square, the airport, and the radio station on the southern side of Moroni. At sunup, some 200 people toiled up the hill to jeer at Ali Soilih, imprisoned in the palace. The mercenaries regrouped in the town square, leaving five men to guard the palace and ten at Camp Voidjou. As light broke on the little island capital, large crowds of Comorans milled in the streets waving handkerchiefs and screaming garbled cries of joy. Their cries resembled the bleating of goats.

At nine-thirty that morning, Denard telephoned Ahmed Abdallah in Paris and told him he could now come home. In Paris, Abdallah promptly announced to the press that the leaders of the coup had appealed to him to return home and help form a government that would be friendly toward France. Denard did not tell the reinstated president that the mercenaries had already broken into the national treasury, where they had found only \$16,000, nor did he mention that they were interrogating Ali Soilih as to the whereabouts of his country's assets.

About an hour later, René, the cook, brought Raki, his Belgian Alsatian, ashore. Word of the dog's arrival spread swiftly. As René and the dog walked up Lagengete Beach, delirious crowds gathered along the shore road applauding the physical manifestation of their witch doctor's prognostication. Unaware of his significance, Raki chased sea gulls in the surf.

At eleven o'clock, Robert Denard made a brief speech over the national radio. He began by introducing himself as Colonel Said Moustapha Mouhadjou and told his listeners that they could call him Colonel Papa for short. (Mouhadjou is a typical Comoran name, the name of the island's largest tree; it denotes a desire to live to an old age.) Colonel Mouhadjou assured the populace that Ali Soilih was in prison and that a new political-military directorate had been created.

Colonel Mouhadjou admitted that he was not Comoran by birth but that he felt Comoran in his heart. To that end, he had adopted the Muslim faith and intended to remain in the Comoros forever. "Now I am old," he said. "I will be fifty years of age this year. I am tired, and I wish to give up my old ways. I want to settle here, to take a Comoran girl as my wife, a girl as young and as beautiful as possible, like all Comoran girls." His Congolese wife continued to reside in Bordeaux. The colonel then invited those young ladies who were not otherwise attached to step forward for his consideration. He concluded by saying that the new republic would return to normal in a few days and asked that his subjects remain calm. When Denard finished, the disc jockey played the four-year-old recording of the Comoran national anthem. It did not, as it usually did, get stuck between the second and third verses.

IV

It is not easy being king, particularly when the kingdom has fallen into ravage and bankruptcy. But Robert Denard was an obstinate man. He would do his duty.

And so during the first weeks of his reign, Denard and his technicians set about making things function. His men occupied such posts as chief of security, controller of immigration, chief of telecommunications surveillance, director of prisons. Denard himself was chief of police and commandant of the army. They cleaned the streets. They whitewashed the lurid revolutionary signs that Ali's regime had painted on the mosques and the town walls. They removed the red star from the two old DC-4s of Air Comores. They put a hundred members of the Commando Moisé, Ali's son, his ministers and torturers, to work in the streets as common laborers. They freed 300 political prisoners, though in the first few months 50 others were imprisoned. Denard imposed an all-night curfew and banned travel between the islands. Soon there was order and discipline again. Denard felt a sense of extraordinary satisfaction.

Two weeks after the coup, Ahmed Abdallah returned to the Comoros. He was profoundly pleased to be home, but within the hour, his liberators began to cause him grave concern. Denard was jubilant, telling his co-conspirator, "At last I have won." Abdallah noticed that his subjects referred to Denard as "the number one president" and that his democratic government was being called "a political-military directorate"; between the airport and Abdallah's summer residence, the road was lined with cheering throngs, many of whom wore T-shirts emblazoned with the name Robert Denard.

That same month, in a simple ceremony at the little mosque by the sea, Denard formally adopted the Muslim faith. He also chose a wife, that same Mazna who had consorted with Ali Soilih. The pretty twenty-year-old accepted his marriage proposal immediately. She much preferred marriage with Denard to living in sin with Ali Soilih. Mazna was the first of three wives Denard acquired that month, and the happy quartet moved into a large house behind the Karthala Hotel.

Despite daily interrogations, Ali Soilih refused to talk. He would not talk about anything. Denard visited him several times in his palace prison, but in response to questions, particularly those concerning the whereabouts of his golden hoard, Ali Soilih shrugged and turned his face to the wall.

On May 28, at three o'clock in the morning, Josef, the young bartender at L'Hôtel Itsandra, while serving a Ricard to a junior minister, heard the sound of two sharp pistol shots somewhere above in the hills. A half an hour later, one of the mercenaries came into the bar. "We have killed the killer," he said. It was announced the next day that Ali Soilih "had been shot while trying to escape." Forty days of celebration were declared in Grand Comoro. Ali Soilih's body was dumped in the back of a Land Rover. He was covered with a sheet so that only his feet, dangling out over the back, could be seen, and he was driven through the crowded streets of the capital. The townspeople danced behind the Land Rover, banging makeshift drums and laughing raucously.

Later that afternoon, Denard and six heavily armed mercenaries drove up the steep, rough track to Chaoueni, the village of Ali Soilih's mother. The mercenaries came in uniform, not in black

battle dress but in the blue uniforms of the Comoran army. Setting Ali Soilih's body onto the ground in a stretcher, Denard told the dictator's eighty-one-year-old mother, "Here is Ali Soilih." The old woman, her friends and relatives, huddled round the stretcher and wailed. There were two neat bullet holes in her son's chest.

That morning, on the radio, the grand mufti told the faithful that he had forbidden Ali Soilih the traditional Muslim burial ceremony so that he would be unable to enter paradise. But in the little yard in front of her house, the dictator's mother buried her son with full Muslim rituals anyway. There is only a small, square, whitewashed tombstone to mark his resting place. As an afterthought, someone scratched Ali Soilih's name in the wet cement. It was misspelled.

Denard put Ali's death behind him; he had other, more pressing concerns. He was beset with revolt both inside and outside the kingdom. At home, Ahmed Abdallah grew increasingly dissatisfied at being thought of as Denard's inferior. And abroad, in July, at a summit conference of the Organization of African Unity in Khartoum, the Comoran delegates were expelled, and prominent African leaders, outraged that an African nation was being controlled by a white mercenary, threatened to boycott the General Assembly of the United Nations should the Comoran delegation take the floor. After his usual fashion, Idi Amin threatened to invade the Comoros. "I don't know what the Africans are so upset about," said Denard. "At least they know where I am. If they drive me out, I will disappear, and who knows where I will turn up next?" But he was not overly perturbed. "If the Comoran people want me to stay," he said, "it will take ten thousand Cubans to expel me."

During the late summer, additional trouble came from an unexpected source—his forty-five technicians. Only one of them, Henri Theroux, a failed dental student, had followed his leader's example and taken the Muslim faith. The little blond mercenary with the handlebar moustache took the name of Abdul Raffiq (servant of God) and a Comoran wife.

But the rest of Denard's men had not been so easily seduced. They had been lured to the Comoros with promises of action and money and beautiful, exotic girls. But there had been little action; by August, the money was running out, and they had consorted with prettier girls in the back streets of Montmartre. In the beginning, the Comoros were preferable to being unemployed or driving taxis round Montparnasse, but the men were now becoming disgruntled and bored. That summer they sat around in La Rose Noire drinking weak wine and talking ponderously of going home.

By summer's end, only half of the original assault force remained. They were replaced with new recruits, and on leaving they were given Comoran diplomatic passports. Their French passports were not stamped so that no one would ever know they had been to the Comoros. Denard was displeased and charged the malingers with a lack of discipline. But he had no real time for reflection. He was a busy man. He had a kingdom to run.

During the late summer, he was seen everywhere in the island. He wore a new blue Comoran army uniform and drove around Moroni in a new black Citroën CX 2000. The Citroën, like Denard's wife, had belonged to Ali Soilih.

Denard had controlled the Comoros for four months now, and the island remained much as it had always been. Little or nothing ever got done. Minor problems appeared to require a cabinet decision. Almost everyone was illiterate and unemployed. No one

wanted to work for the government because everyone knew it was destitute. Nothing worked as it was supposed to. It was the sort of place where in the dry season it always rained.

In mid-September, Ahmed Abdallah and his co-president, Mohammed Ahmed, were summoned to Paris for talks with Giscard d'Estaing. Ali Soilih had been *problem enough* for the French, but now, stung by criticisms of gunboat diplomacy and neocolonialism from friendly African nations, Paris decided to negotiate. Whatever the cost, the government authorities felt the Comoros must remain in the French fold. And if necessary, Denard himself would have to go.

V

I had been in the Comoros for several days when the two presidents returned from Paris. No one, neither the local businessmen, the junior ministers, nor the mercenaries themselves, knew what was happening. They knew only that in Paris a decision had been made that would affect them all. The presidents were greeted at the airport by Denard and his men. There were the usual military formalities.

The following morning, I visited President Ahmed Abdallah at his summer residence. The president wore a white coiffe, a blue suit, a red-and-gray regimental tie. He served orange Fanta and Coca-Cola. Two armed guards stood just outside the door. The president patiently explained that Denard and his technicians would have to leave the Comoros. He had decided. He had the confidence of a man to whom France had given firm assurances. "Colonel Denard has no title nor any official position in this government," he said. "None. He never did have. We are grateful to him. And he is always welcome to return . . . as a tourist." The president smiled and lighted a cigarette. "Would you like some more orange Fanta?" he said.

The president went on to explain that in eight days there would be a national referendum to ratify the new Comoran constitution. The constitution had been published the day before. I pointed out that only 15 percent of the populace was literate. The president said he had taken this into consideration. He had ordered that portions of the constitution be read each day over the national radio. The president said he did not know how many of his people had radios.

That afternoon, Captain Gérard asked me to come to the national gendarmerie. The colonel, he said, had something important to say. At the gendarmerie, Denard sat behind his desk, the trace of a smile on his face, the blue eyes still and cold. He was in uniform—the bracelet of elephant hair round his wrist, the pistol strapped to his side, the paratroop emblem and the five rows of military ribbons on his chest.

"When I came here, a man like me," he said, "I came to do something precise. It was a vow I made to myself. I am proud of what I do. I and my men are free men who choose on which side they fight. I am not ashamed. To do something against your nature is never a solution. I am flattered with Africa's obsession with me. They call me the wolf of the Indian Ocean, and the progressive countries must be pleased that I am here and not somewhere else. What I have done I have done in good conscience. I have never betrayed my country.

"When I leave for Bordeaux, I will leave only stones behind. I didn't come to plunder. On the contrary, I paid to come. I accepted not the salary of a mercenary but that of a worker. I had a sentimental attachment to the Comoros and for my friends

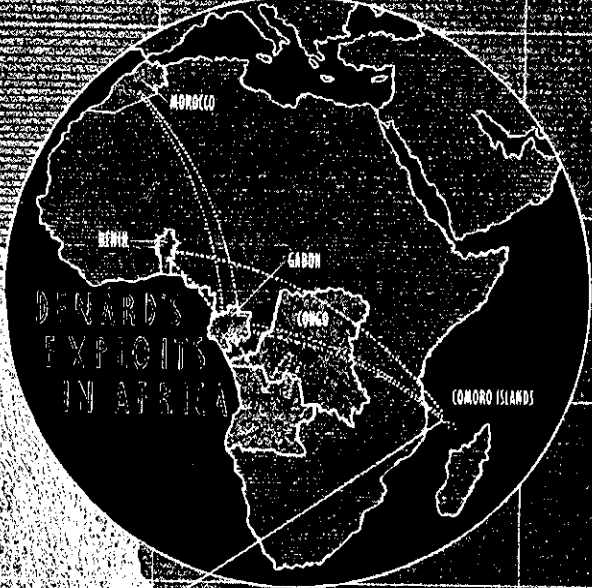
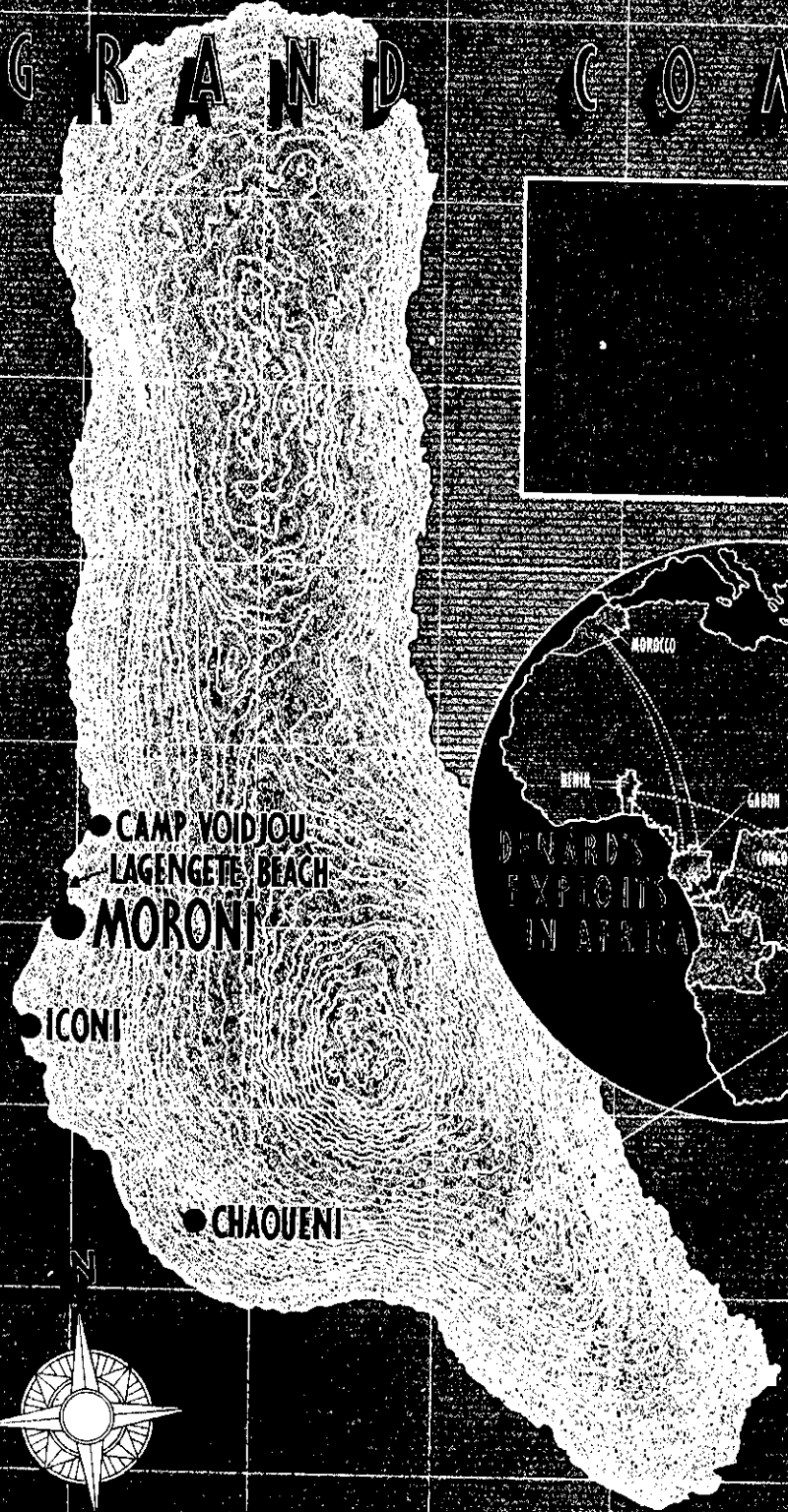
here, most of whom were in jail. I wanted to deliver them, to deliver the country, and I did. I gave them peace and dignity.

"Yes, I will leave my wives behind," he said, "because otherwise my heart will leave here too. God knows, I wanted to stay, but the quality of a good chief is to sacrifice himself for what he loves. I really wanted to stay. I belong here." Denard shrugged and looked away. "Well," he said, "it is not forbidden to dream."

Three days later, at the little airport on Grand Comoro, there was a public ceremony. A large crowd of Comorans jammed the airport roof. President Ahmed Abdallah, his co-president, and all of his cabinet ministers were in attendance. Crack units of the Comoran army stood on parade. The mercenaries were in civilian clothes. Out of uniform, Denard looked ordinary, vulnerable. His face was stiff and vacant. Three little girls presented him with bouquets of flowers and placed leis round the necks of his men. Denard's three wives stood in the distance holding handkerchiefs to their eyes. Denard did not look at them. To the applause of the crowd, President Abdallah conferred on Colonel Denard the title of national hero. The military band played the Comoran national anthem. And because it was the dry season it began to rain. #

M A P

GRAND COMORO



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KILOMETERS