6 Island destabilization: Comoros, Seychelles, Denard

No other mercenary figure crops up so often as does the Frenchman, Colonel Bob Denard, from his first appearance and taste of notoriety in the Congo during the early 1960s to his final exit from the Comoros’ story in 1997. In France where governments have always been cynically ambivalent about the use of mercenaries Denard was seen more as a mythical hero figure from the pages of Beau Geste than as a ruthless peddler of violence and subversion for money. In 1967, at the tail end of the Congo mercenary story, Denard led 16 mercenaries on bicycles across the Angola border into Katanga Province and bluffeo his way 300km to the Kolwezi mine in an attempt to make the Katanga gendarmes rise up against Mobutu. Then he was forced to withdraw to France.1 In 1975 he was again in Central Africa but this time recruiting mercenaries to assist Mobutu’s planned invasion of the Cabinda enclave of Angola. Later he became involved in his first operation in the Comoros. In 1977 he was involved in a curious mercenary ‘invasion’ of Benin in West Africa. He became a key figure in the Comoros from the 1970s through to the 1990s until in June 1997 the prosecutor’s office in Paris ordered Denard and two others to appear in court to answer charges relating to the assassination in Moroni of Ahmed Abdallah Abderrahman, the President of Comoros, on 27 November 1989. Denard denied any involvement in the 1989 assassination but he had reappeared in Comoros in 1995 when he led a coup against President Said Mohamed Djohar.

The Benin ‘invasion’ of January 1977 stands out as one of the more bizarre mercenary actions of that time, an apparent attempt to overthrow the Marxist government of President Ahmed Kerekou. Cotonou Radio announced that a group of mercenaries had been repulsed in an attack on the country. On 16 January 1977, a group of nearly 100 mercenaries, 60 Europeans and about 30 Africans, landed at Cotonou in an unmarked aircraft, seized control of the airport and then drove into the town where they spent the morning firing indiscriminately at any building that looked important; they killed six Beninois and lost

G. Arnold, Mercenaries
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two mercenaries in fighting before Denard ordered his men to retreat. They then flew away. In the haste of their departure the mercenaries left behind one mercenary, a Guinean called Ba Alpha Oumarou, and documents which included detailed plans of the operation as well as the names and bank accounts of all the mercenaries whose leader was identified as Gilbert Bourgeaud (in fact Bob Denard’s real name) who was acting at the time as a French special adviser to President Omar Bongo of Gabon. The captured documents apparently linked the mercenary invasion to France, Morocco and Gabon: the mercenaries appeared to have flown back and forth between Paris and Morocco, to have been trained in Morocco and then to have been assembled in Gabon and flown from there to Benin. The group, codenamed Force Omega, had as its ostensible aim the imposition of a new president on Benin. A subsequent investigation by the United Nations omitted any reference to the countries Benin accused of complicity – France, Gabon and Morocco; it accepted that the attackers had been recruited by a group calling itself the Dahomey Liberation Front. No satisfactory explanation for this curious attack – Benin claimed the mercenaries had done the equivalent of $28m worth of damage in Cotonou – was forthcoming at the time though revelations of French complicity became apparent during Denard’s trial sixteen years later.²

A referendum of 1974 in the Comoros which had been under French control since 1909 resulted in a 96 per cent vote in favour of independence although on the island of Mayotte there was a 64 per cent vote for the status of a French overseas department rather than full independence. French pressures for decentralization which would favour the desire of Mayotte to retain its links with France were rejected by the Comoran chamber of deputies and on 6 July 1975, the chamber voted for a unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) and appointed Ahmed Abdallah as president of the newly independent state. This decision which led to an independent Comoran state of three islands – Grande-Comore, Anjouan and Moheli – and a French overseas department of Mayotte set the scene for years of difficult relations with France and tensions which on several occasions led to mercenary interventions. Although France recognized the independence of the Comoros (less Mayotte) at the end of 1975, relations between France and the new state were suspended. In January 1976 Ali Solih became president and initiated a programme of radical reforms. The excesses of the Solih regime were deeply resented, however, and he was finally overthrown, after four attempted coups, in May 1978. The successful coup was assisted by about 50 European