

*"What Sahel Am I Doin' Here" is a collection of lively, unusual and humorous tales reflecting the author's myriad experiences in Africa. The stories abound with colorful characters, scoundrels, cross-cultural misunderstandings, tribal folklore and mysterious happenings. They also describe behind-the-scenes life in U.S. diplomatic missions abroad.*

# **WHAT SAHEL AM I DOIN' HERE?:**

## **30 Years of Misadventures in Africa**

by Steve Wisecarver

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# What Sahel Am I Doin' Here?



**30 Years of Misadventures in Africa**

**STEVE WISECARVER**

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## THE FIERY CRASH OF AIR SENEGAL?

Even though the last Douglas DC-3 rolled off the line in 1946, 35 years later hundreds of the aircraft were still flying in Africa. Famed for its reliability, flying characteristics and ability to land and take off on short landing strips, the DC-3 was built for the African bush. Of particular interest to African airlines is its capacity for overloading. Technically, its maximum takeoff weight is 24,000 pounds, but DC-3s in Africa routinely exceed this, adding hundreds, even thousands of pounds in goats, diesel fuel, mercenaries, blood diamonds, plantains, spare parts and other assorted goods, legal and illegal.

From the Quonset hut terminal in Guinea Bissau, I watched the *Air Senegal* DC-3 circle the airstrip and then land. The back of my shirt stuck to the orange plastic chair I was sitting in, one of many in a row loosely bolted to the terminal's bare concrete floor. As the plane's passengers disembarked and headed for customs, I took a long, last drag on my Dunhill and stamped it out on the floor (there were no ashtrays). Several wobbly, noisy, ceiling fans slowly stirred the hot, moist air, raising more fear of decapitation than providing any meaningful cooling. Incongruously, a poster for the 1970 Lisbon Open Golf Tournament hung on one wall, the terminal's only decorative art.

The Senegalese *hôtesse de l'air* (flight attendant) called us to the door, examined and then handed back our tickets, and we filed out onto the tarmac. Heat radiating off the dark runway felt like the coils of a toaster. Sweat started to pour from the small exertion of walking to the plane.

Because of the single small wheel in the plane's rear, the DC-3 angled sharply downward from nose to tail. I entered the back door and made my way slowly up the sloped aisle to a seat over the right wing. The air was even more stifling inside, with no ventilation but the lone open door. The plane had only a few passengers, most of whom appeared to be Senegalese or Guinean government functionaries, local traders and European aid workers.

The attendant instructed us to fasten our seat belts and prepare for takeoff. First one, then the other *Pratt and Whitney* prop engine sputtered to life, each belching a cloud of black smoke before the propellers slowly turned, then gradually whirled faster and faster into a rotating blur. As the smoke filtered into the cabin, I wondered when the last engine overhaul had been performed. Aircraft maintenance is always iffy in Africa.

We taxied to the runway's end and the pilot turned the nose into the wind. He revved the engines, keeping his foot on the brake until the plane shook.

When he released it, the DC-3 picked up speed, slowly at first, then the palm trees lining the runway began whizzing by, ever faster, as the plane quickly became airborne.

A few seconds into the flight, as I watched the ground recede, an alarming sight caught my eye: the fuel cap atop the right wing began to quiver, then dance, then fly off completely, dangling only by a small chain. As the plane rapidly climbed, fuel swirled out of the tank, gushed down the wing and ran along the fuselage. The fuel cap now was wildly bouncing off the top of the wing like a tetherball in a hurricane.

"Miss!" I shouted to the attendant sitting at the rear of the plane, simultaneously pointing toward the wing. "Something isn't right over here. Come look." She glared at me from her seat in the rear but did nothing. Agitated, I unbuckled my belt and began to climb out of my seat to get her attention.

"Monsieur," she said, in a dismissive tone, motioning me down with her hand, "the plane is still taking off. You must remain seated."

"You don't understand, Miss. *Le bouchon s'est détaché et l'essence s'écoule tout au long de l'avion.*" (The fuel cap just came off and the fuel is running down the side of the airplane.) I wasn't sure if my technical French was correct, but thought I'd conveyed the essence of the problem.

All eyes now turned back to the attendant, who'd reluctantly unbuckled her belt and—with obvious displeasure—lurched up the steeply sloping aisle, grasping seat backs as she came. She leaned over me to get a better look. When she saw the wildly swinging cap and the fuel swirling out the top of the tank, her eyes widened and she gave out an audible gasp. She quickly ran up to the cockpit, disappearing through the curtain separating it from the passenger cabin. A rapid and excited exchange in Wolof ensued.

The copilot pulled aside the curtain and rushed down the aisle. He leaned over the empty seat in front of me and looked out. All eyes had been on him until the man seated across the aisle from me said, "Hey, the *bouchon* is off here too and the fuel is running down this side of the plane." The copilot glanced toward the left wing, where the other cap wildly dangled from its chain, and saw the fuel swirling out of that tank. He sprinted back through the curtain into the cockpit. The plane immediately began a sharp, 180-degree *Sky King* turn and our *Songbird* headed straight back to the airport.

The passengers were now abuzz. Elderly men in skullcaps and embroidered *boubous* thumbed their prayer beads at a furious pace, reciting prayers and beseeching Allah's blessings. Nervous laughter broke out. A

young Senegalese man and woman clasped each other in a rare display of public affection.

As we descended, fuel continued to stream down both sides of the fuselage. We were a Roman candle in the making, a *Hindenburg* waiting to ignite. (I could hear that 1937 radio announcer's words in my head, "Ohh, the humanity!")

The pilot was apparently going straight in for a landing without dumping the plane's remaining fuel. I wondered about that. *Maybe we'd already lost so much fuel it wasn't necessary? How much of a spark would it take from one of the engines or from the landing gear, if we touched down hard, to turn the plane into a fireball?*

I hastily decided to leave Barbara a final note in case we didn't make it. Having nothing else to write on, I pulled the gold foil from my Dunhill pack and turned it over to its white side. I began to write, "Dear Barb..." but stopped. *What are you thinking? If this plane is incinerated, this piece of foil, your young a\*\* and everything else on board will fit into an ashtray.* I put the foil away.

Nearing the airport, I looked for signs of emergency preparation below. Nothing was happening. The lone yellow fire truck parked near the terminal hadn't moved an inch. I imagined either the battery was dead, it had no fuel, or maybe the tires were flat. I couldn't tell from the air. It was also possible, because civil servants' salaries in Bissau hadn't been paid for months, that the driver hadn't shown up for work that day. I came to the grim realization that there wouldn't be any foam spread on the runway before we landed, or on the plane, for that matter, if it caught fire. I flashed on an absurd image of ground crews forming a bucket brigade to douse the smoldering wreckage.

It was clear we were on our own, in one of the world's least developed countries, where virtually nothing worked. No qualified doctors. No ICUs. No special burn units. Few or no medical supplies or equipment. *Hell, they don't even have aspirin in the main hospital. Say "Good Night," Dick.*

The fuel continued to stream along the fuselage as the plane descended. A flying crematorium. It'd be a spectacular bonfire for all the locals to see. I imagined the next day's headlines: "A Fiery Crash at Bissau Airport—All Aboard Air Senegal Flight Perish."

As we eased closer to the ground, we continued losing speed and altitude. At a few feet above the tarmac the din among passengers grew, and prayers and cries went up to Allah and Dieu (futile, I thought, but I called on the Almighty as well, figuring it couldn't hurt). The pilot pulled up the nose and



cut the engines. The plane inched closer to the ground. Entreaties from passengers grew louder. Were we all going to die?

I gritted my teeth when the rubber screeched as the two front wheels hit the tarmac. The plane bounced twice, then began to roll. The small back wheel at the rear of the aircraft finally touched down. After a seeming eternity, we slowed and taxied to a halt at the end of the runway. No sparks. No flames. We'd made it! I realized I'd been holding my breath and exhaled.

Everyone exploded into applause, laughter and shouts of joy. We beamed at one another like doughboys in a foxhole who'd just dodged an incoming mortar. Passengers pumped one other's hands and strangers hugged like long-lost kin.

The copilot re-emerged from the curtain, sauntered down the aisle as if this were all routine and exited the back door. He climbed onto the right wing and screwed down the fuel cap, then onto the left, repeating the act. He nonchalantly climbed back in, closed the rear door and strode back up to the cockpit.

Within minutes, the engines again sputtered to life and we taxied to the end of the runway. Once more, the pilot turned the DC-3 into the wind, revved the engines, the plane picked up speed, and we were soon airborne a second time, heading north towards Dakar.

I was confused by our sudden re-departure. Troubling thoughts filled my mind. *Why hadn't they refueled after we'd lost so much out of the wing tanks? Were the fuel gauges working properly? Were they working at all? Was anyone else besides me—like the pilot—even thinking about this? What else had they forgotten to check before we first took off?*

I mentally ticked off more and more questions. After several minutes, I concluded that it was probably better not to know any of these answers, turning my attention to the dense green jungle far below and to the trees that now resembled heads of broccoli from the air. I couldn't help but wonder about one more thing: *where would we ever be able to land in the midst of that forest if we ran out of fuel?*

I decided not to pursue that train of thought either. I said a little prayer of thanks and pulled the Dunhill wrapper out of my pocket again, just in case I needed to write a quick note....

## A RACE FOR THE AGES AT THE HIPPODROME, BAMAKO 1984

At age 33, I was in peak shape, having dropped eight pounds via diet and exercise, getting down to a svelte 180 pounds. My strict regimen included daily two-mile runs around an old colonial horseracing track, the *Hippodrome*, near our house. Dressed in my color-coordinated sweat suit, I donned a pair of \$75 Nike running shoes and set out for my evening run.

As I headed to the track, a band of local kids enthusiastically cheered me on, shouting, “*Toubabou! Toubabou!*” (White Man!) and, “*Boli! Boli!*” (Run! Run!). As I approached them, the little street urchins began running with me, taking two strides to my one. Predictably, after a short distance, they began dropping off, one by one. However, a tiny waif, aged eight or nine, seemed determined to stay with me. He was terribly emaciated and obviously malnourished, running along on skeletal pins bowed by rickets. His feet were bare and he had several sores on his legs. I hoped he’d peel off soon so he wouldn’t burn up the remaining calories in his disease-wracked little body.

His spirit wasn’t to be broken easily though. As I neared the track, a half-mile from the house, he was still matching my pace, his spindly little legs furiously churning. I smiled down at him and decided it was time to discourage the poor little guy from expending what little energy he had left. I quickened the pace, knowing he couldn’t take a hundred yards at this speed. I’d leave him in the dust once and for all.

To my surprise, he stuck with me like a shadow, losing only a step. As we rounded the second turn of the mile-long track, the little fiend was right on my heels. I thought I heard a tubercular rattle coming from his caved-in little chest, but I soon realized it was my own increasingly belabored breathing. Drool formed at the corners of my mouth. My legs were getting heavier and heavier and a sharp pain gouged my right side. At the pace we were going I was starting to hit a wall.

When we neared the end of the mile-long course, I had a Eureka moment. I bet the little munchkin thought I was only going to do one lap then peel off toward home. *Hah! Imagine his surprise when he’d see me pass the homeward path and continue around the track again. His hopes would be dashed. He’d surely balk at the prospect of another go-round.*

Despite my severe fatigue, I felt giddy as I passed the path home and continued on a second mile-long lap. I kept up a quick pace, knowing my little tormentor would soon abandon all hope and collapse somewhere near the turn-

off. I glanced around behind me, expecting to see him, by now, a crumpled heap on the ground.

*But there he was. Pulling up beside me. What kind of millet was this kid eating, anyway? Could he have a milligram of glycogen left in his body? He must've already burned more carbs than an average Malian family of four consumes in a week. Where's the little bugger getting his energy? And his will?*

I was now gasping for breath like an asthmatic cow, and sweat and spittle were flying everywhere. My lungs were scorched and it felt like someone had injected lead into the air chambers of my Nikes. I had no choice but to slow the pace. Instantly, the consumptive dwarf pulled even with me, then took the lead. Now it was my turn to try to keep up. Meanwhile, I noticed his urchin friends had gathered on the edges of the track and were pointing in our direction, laughing. My embarrassment wouldn't have been evident, though—because my body was overtaxed, overheated and exhausted; my face had already turned bright crimson.

Pride was the only thing that kept me from collapsing on the second lap. I quickened the pace again, catching up with the little devil to make it clear he wasn't setting the pace. We were both just out on a “leisurely” training run. The only thing I really wanted to do was vomit, but I put on a brave smile, affecting an appearance of casual insouciance. As we neared the end of the second mile and approached the path to my house, my oxygen-deprived brain toyed with the idea of passing the turn-off again, making my tiny tormentor think I was going around for a third lap. I quickly dismissed the idea, though. I knew deep down it wouldn't faze him. And I wouldn't make it.

We left the *Hippodrome* and raced down the path toward home. It was getting dark as we entered the final half-mile stretch to my gate. I felt like a boxer who'd punched himself out by Round 8 but was still wobbling around the ring in Round 12, arms hanging limply at his sides. I stole a glance at the little runt, who still strode lightly beside me, oblivious to the massive pain he was causing me. We neared the spot where he'd originally joined me and I hoped he'd peel off there. Of course, he didn't.

My lungs were now on fire, my mouth was bone dry and my ears were ringing as I struggled to keep up the pace, stumbling over the last couple hundred yards. Through glazed eyes I could, at last, see my house. Then, an exhilarating idea came to me: the little sucker had no idea where the finish line was. I had him by the gonads but he didn't know it. Adrenaline surged through my lactic-acid-riddled body and I exploded in a frenzied burst of last-gasp energy. Twenty yards from the finish line (my front gate), I looked around and

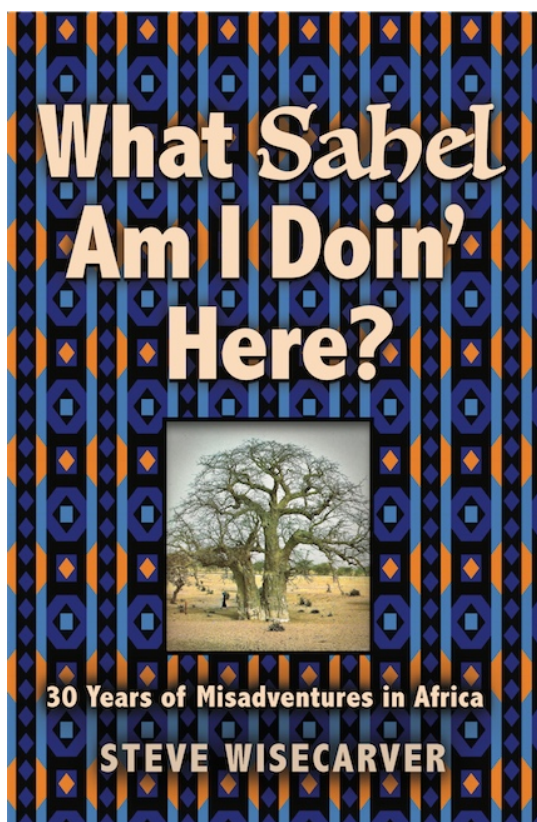
saw the emaciated gnome had fallen some five paces behind. He probably couldn't fathom how the scarlet-colored *toubabou*, eyes bulging, chest heaving and veins in his temples popping, could pour on such a torrid leg-kick after almost three miles of running. As I crossed the imaginary finish line, I thrust my arms into the air and immediately stopped, bent over and steadied myself, putting my hands on my knees, praying that I wouldn't puke or fall on my face. The race was over and I'd won!

After several minutes, I managed to suck in enough air and steady my trembling legs to be able to straighten up and approach my noble competitor, who'd stopped running as soon as I had. He was giving me a quizzical look, as if to say, "Why did we stop running here?" Using my security guard, Maiga, as an interpreter, I gave the urchin a short lecture about the importance of knowing the rules and explained to him that the gate to my house was a logical finish line for the foot race.

As I'd suspected, the verbal exchange with Maiga revealed that the urchin was indeed a ringer: he wasn't eight or nine years old—he was 11. And he was a goat and sheepherder for his father (these animals often go astray, requiring the young shepherds to run after them). Little wonder he was able to run the way he did—he did it for a living! I felt deeply gratified I'd been able to pull this one out.

I gave him a hearty smile and a handshake, and congratulated him on his fine performance, even though he'd come up short. He beamed at me in return. Ours would be a lifetime bond, the kind only known to those who compete at the very highest levels of their sport.

The race also made me feel good about my diet and exercise regimen. It was obviously paying real dividends. Maybe next week I'd take on one of those emaciated little beggars who hung out in front of the *Malimag* supermarket. If I could beat an opponent of this caliber, the sky was the limit. I could now think of contending with 12-year-olds.



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