

# Botswana USASMA student strives for change

**MASTER SGT. TROY FALARDEAU**  
USASMA

If you ask Warrant Officer Gift Mbatisi to describe his home in Botswana, you might think it sounds a lot like the Lone Star State. It seems everything there is Texas-sized. The U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy student said he feels very comfortable in his temporary home at Fort Bliss.

His homeland is a landlocked southern African country with a population of more than 1.7 million people, about the size of Texas and dominated by the Kalahari Desert. The country also has some Texas-sized blessings when it comes to natural resources. The Okavango Delta, the largest of its kind in the world, stretches across the northwest part of the county. It also has beautiful savannahs and grasslands with wildlife refuges where animals like the blue wildebeest and antelopes run wild and delight tens of thousands of tourists a year. But, more than anything else, these blessings include those below the surface, but they remained unknown until the right moment, he said with a smile.

"In the late 1800s, Britain accepted the request of our local tribal leaders to put the area under their protection," said Mbatisi. The Germans and Dutch in the area were expanding their control, so the British saw our land as a way to stop that progress."

"In the early 1900s, this rivalry faded and they all seemed to lose



**Warrant Officer Gift Mbatisi, a student at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, discusses his training with Louis Salas of the International Military Student Office.**

interest in our land," said Mbatisi. "We like to say that this land is a gift from our forefathers, and that we are fortunate the Europeans who were in our country before did not look beneath their feet."

If they had, he added, they would have found a treasure chest of minerals, including large deposits of diamonds, nickel and copper. Those resources coupled with an increasing tourism industry have helped make Botswana one of the most economically stable countries in Africa.

An even prouder achievement in Mbatisi's eyes is his country's history

of democratic rule. Unlike many other African nations, Botswana has a proven track record: last month it celebrated its 40th year of uninterrupted civilian leadership since it gained independence Sept. 30, 1966. He said he joined the Botswana Defense Force in 1981 to protect that commitment.

"In 1977, our country was invaded by neighboring Rhodesia, and 15 members of our police force were ambushed," he said.

The event shocked the nation, and in the wake of the attack, Botswana formed the BDF to protect itself. Four years later, days after finishing sec-

ondary education, he left his hometown of Gulubane and went to visit his uncle in the capital city of Gabarone. True to his previous commitment, he was in a military uniform within days.

After seven months of basic training, he was selected to join the Mechanical Engineer Regiment, based on his aptitude and previous education. Since then, he has advanced in his career field to become a leading armament technician. Most of his training was in Botswana, but Mbatisi has traveled to other places. In 1991, he attended the Vulcan Repair Course at Redstone Arsenal, Ala.; in 2000, he attended a gun assembly course in Austria.

His travel to the United States is not unique within the BDF. In fact, recent statistics show the U.S. is the largest supporter of the BDF and its more than 12,000 soldiers, largely through International Military Education and Training funds. For example, more than 85 percent of its officers have trained here at one time or another. Since English is an official language in Botswana and spoken by a majority of its citizens, training here is a good fit for the BDF. Mbatisi said this U.S. training has led to some significant changes, and he is hopeful it continues.

"Our current Force Sergeant Major – the top enlisted soldier in the BDF – is a graduate of Class 46 of [USAS-

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