

## IRT Builds Unique Institutional Knowledge for the DOD

LTC Aaron Smith



**BLUF.** IRT provides expertise the Department of Defense could not otherwise develop.

**The Spark.** From October to December 2021, the Tigray Defense Forces conducted a coordinated advance on the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, greatly expanding the scope of the 2020-2022 Tigray War. The advance threatened to transform an isolated intra-state conflict into an existential threat to the Ethiopian government and regional stability.

**Why it Matters.** Ethiopia is the second most populace country in Africa, the home of the African Union, a key provider of regional stability and home to tens-of-thousands of United States citizens. This last fact is of vital importance to the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) who stood up an operational planning team (OPT) to prepare for a potential non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) in Ethiopia's northern and capital regions in the fall of 2021.

**The Hole in the Swing.** The OPT was assembled from staff officers responsible for various portfolios related to Africa. The team began a methodical analysis of the situation. They addressed questions such as where the American Citizens are, where the airports are located, what the runways are like at those airports, what languages are spoken in each of the regions, etc. There was one significant shortfall on the team. None of its members had ever set foot into Ethiopia. They were gathering information based upon the best available at the time. However, even in our modern connected world, there are significant gaps in available data to areas such as the Amara highlands and Tigray regions of Ethiopia.

**The Answer.** I had recently been assigned to USSOCOM to develop Special Operations relationships throughout the Middle East, enabled by the Abraham Accords. I became aware of the OPT when a team member, who knew I was a Sub-Saharan African specialist, asked me if I had any experience in Ethiopia. I met with the team and was able to answer the vast majority of their outstanding information gaps. Which airports could handle which planes based on their runway condition? I had landed at three of the four airports in question and could answer from

experience. Which languages in which towns? I had traveled overland through the region and was able to identify the linguistic/cultural boundaries of the region.

How I Knew. I traveled northern Ethiopia in 2016 as part of my In Region Training (IRT). The IRT program is a year-long program designed to build cross-cultural competence through immersion. Participants gain a deep understanding of their region, local culture, and language, as well as experience living and working while assigned at a U.S. Embassy overseas. During IRT I traveled extensively both by air and overland to visit various locations in northern Ethiopia. I met with local people and heard their stories, their grievances, and their world views. While I did not appreciate the full importance of this knowledge at the time, I learned five years later that my experience was key to closing information gaps in a planning the evacuation of United States citizens from an active war zone. All be it, an evacuation that never happened.

About the Author: LTC Aaron Smith is a 48J currently assigned to the Commander's Action Group, USSOCOM. Previous assignments include USSOCOM J5 XO, USSOCOM Iran Planner, Colorado School of Mines ROTC, and OSC Chief Chad & Central African Republic. He resides with his wife, Jodi, and three amazing children in Tampa, FL. Aaron and his family look forward to returning to Bless the Rains in the near future.