

U.S. Army NCOs Lead Training of Djibouti's First Logistics Unit

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester - NCO Journal

July 25, 2016



During a culminating event after five months of training, Djiboutian army soldiers approach a roadblock.

As the soldiers of Djibouti joined the African Union Mission to Somalia to help fight the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, they had a major weakness: The Djiboutian army had no logistics unit.

That made resupplying their soldiers in Somalia difficult and sometimes impossible. Djiboutian army officers requested U.S. Army help, and a Regionally Aligned Forces group of U.S. Army Soldiers recently spent five months in Djibouti training the country's first army logistics unit.

Because there had not been any logistics soldiers in the Djiboutian army, training began almost from scratch, said Staff Sgt. Richard Keaton, senior foreign weapons instructor for the United States Army Africa RAF training team.

"We've been doing supply operations, convoy operations, basic rifle marksmanship, advanced rifle marksmanship, various tasks that you'd have your everyday soldier do," Keaton said.

"Because it's a new company, they haven't had any basic training or basic military drills, so

that's what we've been enforcing.



Staff Sgt. Richard Keaton, senior foreign weapons instructor for the U.S. Army Africa RAF training team, instructs a member of the Djiboutian army on properly mounting a weapon. (Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

“The main goal is to support the African Union Mission to Somalia,” he said. “By helping train up the Djiboutians, it supports the mission in Somalia. It gives them the tools necessary to survive out there. The entire time they’ve been going down to Somalia, their logistics packages have come through air drops and air resupplies. What they are trying to do now is ground resupplies. So, that’s the importance of standing up this logistics company. We’re giving them the ability to move supplies from Djibouti to Somalia by ground and get them there securely and safely.”

The RAF brought together Soldiers from three different divisions: the 10th Mountain Division of Fort Drum, New York; the 1st Armored Division of Fort Bliss, Texas; and the 3rd Infantry Division of Fort Stewart, Georgia.

Sgt. 1st Class Charles Frith, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the RAF, said the group came together after the 10th Mountain Division Sustainment Brigade was tasked with the mission.



As Staff Sgt. Richard Keaton and other U.S. Army Soldiers look on, members of the Djiboutian army go through an exercise on dealing with roadblocks.

“They wanted extra stuff that we just didn’t have on hand,” Frith said. “For instance, they wanted some foreign weapons training, and in sustainment we don’t train with foreign weapons. So they went out to other divisions and tasked some of those folks to come in and provide those things for us.”

Challenges

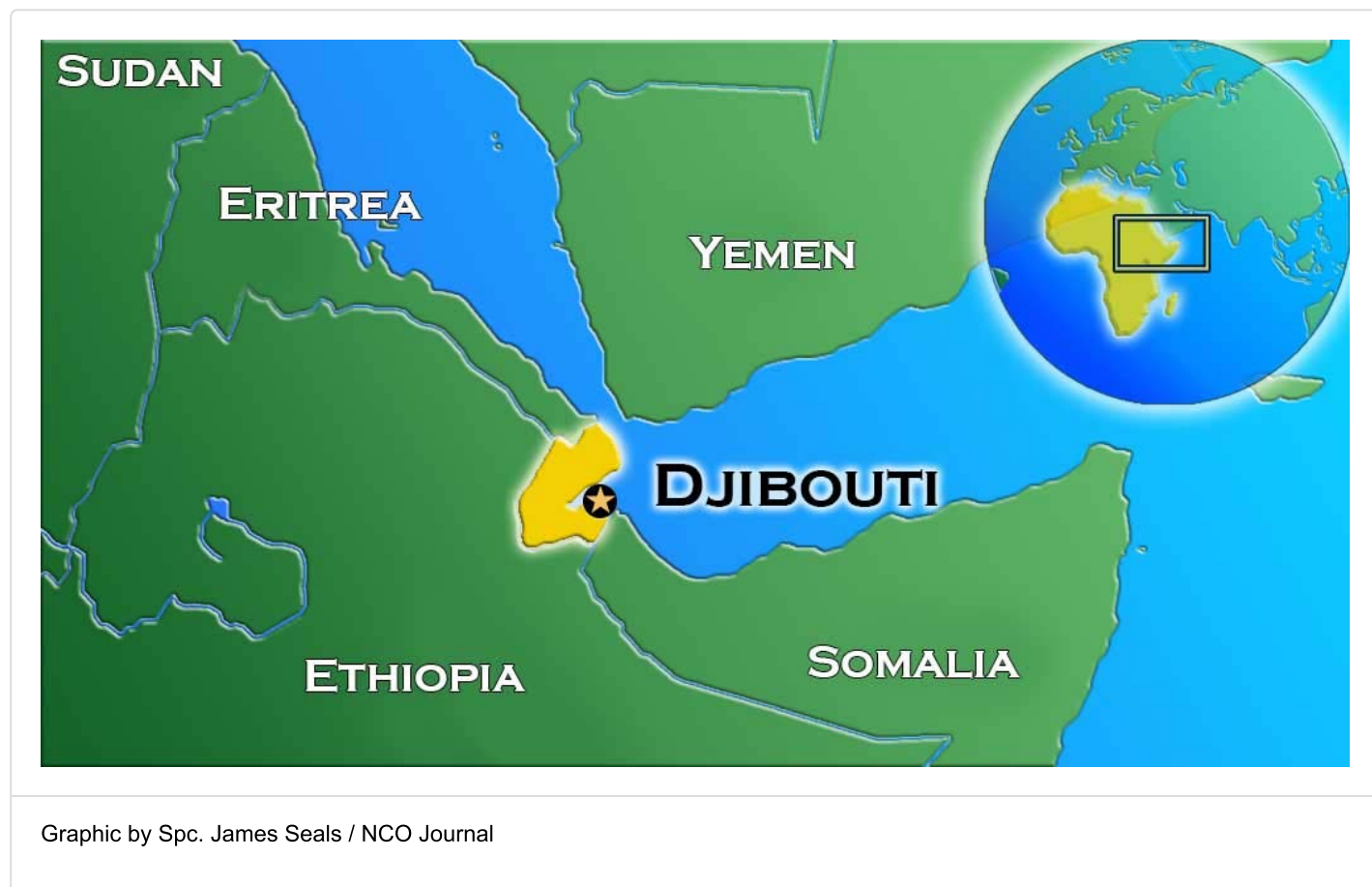
At the beginning, the limited knowledge of the Djiboutians meant the U.S. Army NCOs had to stop and make sure the Djiboutian soldiers could do things that might usually be taken for granted. For instance, before they could teach the Djiboutians how to drive heavy vehicles, they first had to make sure they knew how to drive, Frith said.

“When we get a new Soldier into a U.S. Army unit, I know that Soldier knows how to do some basic things, just from life alone, and then also from what they’ve been taught since they’ve been in the military,” Frith said. “Here, that has not been the case. Things that I would normally overlook I’ve had to learn to pay more attention to those details and talk to those guys more on

evening, I've had to learn to pay more attention to these details and talk to these guys more up front and say, 'Where, really, are you with your training? Here's where we thought you were going to be, but can you drive a vehicle? Do you have the strength to pull back a 50-cal charge handle? Is your arm big enough for a tourniquet to go around?' Some of their arms were too small for a tourniquet to go around. So we had to teach them ways around that."

The notorious heat in the Horn of Africa was another challenge the NCOs had to overcome to train the Djiboutian logistics unit. Though the Soldiers lived at Camp Lemonnier, a U.S. Africa Command base in Djibouti, they had little other affiliation with the camp. Their work took place at Djiboutian army facilities, and they worked a different schedule than most at Camp Lemonnier.

"We're the only people in country who work a Djiboutian schedule, which is Sunday through Thursday," Keaton said. "It will get to about 115 (degrees Fahrenheit) with the heat index, so they shut down everything about 1100, then come back into work about 1600 or 1700 and work until 2000. That's just to avoid the extreme heat."



With a Djiboutian population that speaks a variety of languages, including Somali, Afar, Arabic and French, communication could sometimes take time, said Sgt. Scott Winkler, the RAF's medical NCO in charge.

"The biggest problem is the language barrier," Winkler said. "For the most part, the officers mainly speak French, though a lot of the officers and some of the NCOs speak some English

mainly speak French, though a lot of the officers and some of the NCOs speak some English. The enlisted, we had some English, French, Somali and Afar. So when we were teaching, our translators would have to translate it three times so that everybody could get the information.”

NCO roles

As is often the case when the U.S. Army is working with a foreign army, the role of the NCO was a frequent discussion point between the two sides, Frith said.

“Their army is a new army, and their NCO corps is not very well established,” Frith said. “The roles of what their NCO does in their army is new to them. They are a very officer-heavy military. For years, they focused all their training on the officer side of the house. Now, working with the U.S. military, they see that there is a lot of benefit from bringing the NCOs into it. They have to get them more engaged.”

“They do start to notice that the U.S. NCOs lead the training,” Winkler said. “So, recently we’ve been seeing the NCOs on their side start to pick up and train their soldiers, which is really good to see.”

The value of NCOs is clear in the U.S. Army, especially during training like this, said Capt. Daniel Samuelson, the officer in charge of the RAF training group.

“As someone who has never come out and trained a partner nation before, these NCOs bring a lot of experience to the table, and they’ve been consummate professionals the entire time,” Samuelson said. “What NCOs bring to the mission is they *are* the mission. They’re the executors; they make it happen. On the officer side, we plan, we give guidance. But ultimately, when it comes down to it, they are the ones making it happen. So without them, there wouldn’t be any mission here.”

Ready to learn

Members of the RAF training team all highlighted one positive of training the Djiboutian forces: their desire and willingness to learn.

“I did a little bit of this type of training in Afghanistan, and it wasn’t as successful,” Winkler said. “The Afghans would just kind of come in and leave. These guys really enjoy getting the training, which is a nice change. They come in, and they are ready to learn. When you teach to them, they give it their all. They pick up on the information really quickly.”

Keaton’s focus was on teaching the Djiboutian soldiers about weapons, and their desire to learn made the work easier, he said. Keaton also had previous experience training Afghan forces and agreed that the positive attitude of the Djiboutian soldiers made a large difference in what they learned.

“It’s extremely rewarding, training weapons,” Keaton said. “A lot of these guys had never touched an AK-47 before. So having a guy actually remember what we taught him and be excited about it, be excited about how he shot that 50-cal, how he shot that AK-47: it’s rewarding to see that excitement in their eyes.”



During a culminating event after five months of training, Djiboutian army soldiers show what they’ve learned about logistics.

After five months of training, the U.S. Soldiers were eager to watch the Djiboutian soldiers put their newfound knowledge on display in a culminating event that involved the Djiboutian forces executing a convoy lane while under fire. Their actions during the event were impressive, Frith said.

“Comparing from the day we got here until now, outstanding,” he said. “When we first got here, if we had told them they were going to go to a convoy lane and execute, most of them would have jumped in the vehicles, drove right out and drove right through the point. Whatever vehicle got hit and died, the rest of the guys may have stopped, or they may have just left that vehicle and kept going. Today, coming out here, they communicated. Their NCOs came up and did battle drills with them before they hopped in their vehicles. They verified that their equipment was going to be mounted and was working properly. They had the right people. They verified communications. They got a convoy manifest in order. And then they started patrol. The details of pulling that together, when we got here, they couldn’t do. Some of the guys couldn’t even drive a vehicle.”

The Djiboutian unit then demonstrated their knowledge and skills in dealing with a roadblock, an improvised explosive device and a downed vehicle.

“Bringing all that together ... it’s only a few minutes of execution, but they are demonstrating months of training. It was outstanding,” Frith said.

Samuelson said the culminating event made it clear that the new Djiboutian army logistics unit was prepared for its mission.

“There is significant progress,” Samuelson said. “They’re not U.S. Soldiers, but they are a competent force. They’ve grown from nothing into something they can use in Somalia.”

U.S. Army Regionally Aligned Forces group trains Djiboutian army logistics unit



After the culminating event, Wosam Abdul Hassen, a Djiboutian soldier who was part of the training, expressed his appreciation for the U.S. Army Soldiers who taught him so much.

“We learned a lot of things,” Hassen said. “Now we can do a lot of things that we didn’t know how to do before. The training was good. I say to them, ‘Thank you.’”

In addition to helping fill a gap in the Djiboutian army, all the NCOs agreed that the training mission had also made them better noncommissioned officers. Keaton said working with the Djiboutian soldiers, building them up slowly despite language barriers and an early lack of knowledge, taught him patience.

“It’s taught me that working with different types of people, you have to train them differently,” Keaton said. “We already have that in the States; you can’t train every Soldier the same way. But this has broadened my perspective on how to train Soldiers and how to actually make an impact so that Soldiers can learn. Sometimes you have to break it down to the lowest level in order to get somebody to understand it.”

“It has helped everybody out on both ends,” Winkler said. “They have received a lot from us,

but at the same time, we've learned a lot from them. We've learned how to adapt teaching styles to get the point across in an efficient way. I think it's grown all of us as leaders and NCOs."