

CAMP LEMONNIER DJIBOUTI, AFRICA



Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Johnson, 304th Civil Affairs Brigade, is serving as the assistant liaison officer at the U.S. Embassy in Djibouti. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

Assignment to U.S. Embassy Leads NCO to Unexpected Professional Development

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester, NCO Journal

Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Johnson has been deployed multiple times, but sometimes a mission still surprises him, such as acting as assistant liaison officer at the U.S. Embassy in Djibouti.

Johnson's primary branch is civil affairs, where he typically joins a team of Soldiers to work with the local populace to identify the locals' needs, wants and solutions. That's what he expected to be doing in Djibouti, when he was called instead to the U.S. Embassy, serving as a line of contact between the U.S. Departments of Defense and State. It was not a job he felt ready for.

"When I found out I would be a liaison officer, I felt completely unprepared because this is not my background," Johnson said. "But somebody is trusting in me.

I want to be able to make this work and be successful on behalf of the Department of Defense and the Department of State to show that we can work together. I've learned so much."

Johnson arrived in Djibouti from the 304th Civil Affairs Brigade out of Bristol, Pennsylvania. His main job is to make sure communication between the two departments remains smooth.

"I'm not always the direct chain, but I help facilitate," Johnson said. "I set up meetings so that the commanding general and the ambassador can communicate and have the conversations they need at their levels."

In addition, he facilitates access to the embassy for anybody from Camp Lemonnier or Combined Joint Task



Graphic by Spc. James Seals / NCO Journal

Force-Horn of Africa who has business there. He helps others with their passports and plans bi-weekly security meetings between the U.S. Ambassador to Djibouti Tom Kelly, the Commanding General of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa Maj. Gen. Kurt Sonntag and other officials from Camp Lemonnier to discuss pressing issues.

“For example,” Johnson said, “how is Ramadan going to affect Djibouti? How is it going to impact workers here and missions going forward? And how can the Departments of Defense and State collaborate to assist and celebrate during Ramadan?”

As busy as Johnson is at the embassy, he also leads an impressive array of activities at Camp Lemonnier, said Maj. Philip C. Schaub of J9 (interagency partnering) for CJTF-HOA.

“As an active member of the Joint Senior Enlisted Council, Sgt. 1st Class Johnson organized and managed a campwide ‘Spring Fling’ event to provide fun, food and summer safety tips for U.S. Embassy employees and their families,” Schaub said. “He collaborated with all camp associates (USO, Red Cross, Joint Forces 5, Echo 6, etc.) to ensure a successful event. Johnson has volunteered more than 250 hours in support of Friends of Africa Volunteers. He participated in the French English Discussion Group and was the project lead for Troops to Teachers.”

Making connections with people as part of efforts like Troops to Teachers has been rewarding and has helped the mission in some unexpected ways, Johnson said.

“With Troops to Teachers, we bring Djiboutian students on the base temporarily to network, to discuss and to teach them English,” Johnson said. “They already

speak five languages fluently. We got to know them and found out a few of them work at the airport. By chance, they’ve been able to assist us as a military with small, but important, tasks when we’ve needed help at the airport, just because we’ve already built that relationship. It’s unique and genuine.”

In addition to all the work Johnson does both at the embassy and volunteering at Camp Lemonnier, he still steps up in many other ways, Schaub said.

“On May 12, Sgt. 1st Class Johnson was enroute back to camp from the embassy when he observed smoke emitting from a local market,” he said. “Without hesitation, he stopped, secured his first aid bag and assisted those in need. He monitored the situation and assisted where needed. Johnson demonstrated his willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty that day.”

Though no injuries were reported, Johnson, with the help of a translator he found on the scene, helped people evacuate the market and phoned in requests for additional fire trucks. Afterward, Johnson made sure the translator was honored for his help.

“As an NCO, Johnson brings a unique set of skills to the job, a set of skills the foundation of which was created in boot camp and has been built brick-by-brick as he progressed through the enlisted ranks,” Schaub said. “It is clear that Sgt. 1st Class Johnson has had good mentors as he has progressed through his career because he is more than willing to assist junior enlisted Soldiers and ensure that not only the mission is always completed and successful but that the Soldiers learn from their experiences. This is what a good NCO does.”

Though he was not expecting to work at the embassy, Johnson said, the experience has made him a better NCO.

“This is something I never would have put personal time into, but now that I’ve had the opportunity to take advantage of it, it’s been good to get a better understanding of what the Department of State’s political officer does, what the economics officer does,” Johnson said. “I’ve learned how that enhances our job, our skill set and our mission here as the Department of Defense.”

Camp Lemonnier isn’t a large post, but on it are coalition forces, in addition to all four branches of the U.S. military. That mix offers another opportunity for NCO professional development, Johnson said.

“There are so many coalition forces here, so there is the opportunity to meet up on any night and just socialize,” Johnson said. “I participate with the French English Discussion Group because I have a little bit of background in French. You learn a lot by just talking to some of their military members, and doing things like going over to the French base and seeing what their conditions are like.”

Watching how the other branches of the U.S. military work can help NCOs think about solutions in new ways, Johnson said.

“The Army J6 (communications) versus the Air Force J6 operate very differently,” he said. “That’s something

you learn and take back with you. It gets you outside of that train-to-fix vision of thinking just because that is what the Army has taught you. You can think, ‘Oh, I’ve seen the Marines do it this way, and the Navy does it this way.’ We have a variety of NCO organizations or associations here.”

For those looking to duplicate Johnson’s success, his recipe involves getting out of whatever comfort zone you are in and spending time building relationships.

“As an NCO, and as a person, if you want something done, you can’t sit back,” Johnson said. “You have to have initiative and you have to go out and put a face to the name. You can’t sit back and wait for an e-mail.

“Build the relationships before you need them,” Johnson said. “Where I sit as the assistant liaison officer, I go to the J6, because you never know when your communications are going to come down. Go meet the personnel office and say, ‘This is who I am. This is what I’m trying to do here.’ Build those relationships face-to-face, up-front. I think the Department of State does that very well. It’s something on the DOD side that a lot of people do very well, but it’s something we can do better.”

Johnson may not have been expecting his latest mission, but as NCOs so often do, he adapted and has become an important part of making the U.S. military’s mission in Djibouti successful. ■



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