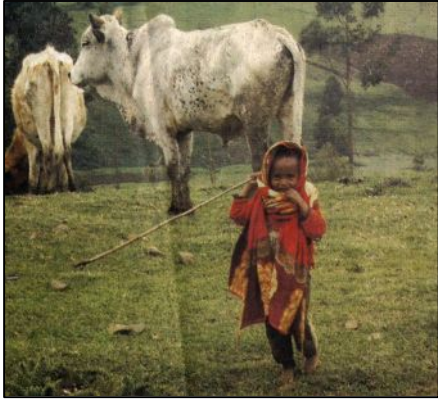


AMERICAN BLESSINGS MORE APPARENT AFTER LIFE-ALTERING VISIT TO ETHIOPIA

By Lt. Col. Angela Roberts Stout
Special to the Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN
Sunday, 26 October 2008, pg. C-1

I have just returned from a life-altering military deployment to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. If you had asked me five months ago to describe Ethiopia (or any country in Africa) or to point to it on a map, I would have struggled to do so. I really didn't care about Ethiopia – I wouldn't have given them a second thought. I was sadly ignorant and, instead, my thoughts on Africa were formed by the short one-minute television segments on CNN or Fox News, the periodic special article in Time or Newsweek or the occasional NPR broadcast. While my deployment to Addis Ababa in no way made me an African expert, I do have a better appreciation for the issues in Ethiopia but, more importantly, I am now more than ever thankful that I am an American! I am blessed and you are also.



From the day I stepped off the Ethiopian Airlines airplane, my senses were overloaded. I was trying to take in all of the sense and commit them to memory. My heart immediately was saddened by the numerous beggars and truly helpless people that would come up to me or my car. Exhausted mothers with their babies in their arms motioning their hand to their mouth, which was the gesture I soon understood meant they were hungry and were asking me for food. The 5- or 6-year old children, who in American would be playing with dolls or toy cars, were darting in and out of traffic to try and get drivers to buy their tissues or chewing gum. The seriously handicapped people would hobble over to us or drag their legless bodies over to my door and tap on it, asking for some food or money.

The homeless were typically the elderly, handicapped or mothers with their little children. I found that I came to know which homeless person "lived" on each curbside. Each morning there was the mother who had her toddler under a mound of clothes and a plastic tarp. She would be trying to make some curbside coffee for the people catching the buses and, at the same time, try to keep her toddler warm, which was difficult to do since we were in the rainy season and almost every morning it was raining.

Then there was the garbage pile that was under a metal awning; I was saddened to see a woman each day sleeping on the garbage pile with her plastic garbage bag, but then I was sickened to one day see the head of a tiny 2-year old peek out from underneath this same woman.

My words do a disservice to the true poverty I saw while in Ethiopia, and I have to admit that towards the end of my deployment, I found myself somewhat used to the scenes of poverty. I have visited many parts of the United States, and let me emphatically say we are not anywhere close to the level of poverty I saw in Ethiopia. We are a truly rich nation and we are a nation where each person has endless opportunities.

I quickly decided that, besides my military work, I would try and help in focused ways. I first had to do some research about the city and the people. I found out that you could purchase food tickets and hand out these tickets instead of money to beggars. The tickets could be reimbursed for lunches in a few locations of the city. I visited one of the locations and volunteered to sponsor a few lunches on my own. This sponsorship consisted of paying 200 birr (about \$20) to pay for one lunch day and feed 700 people. The process was to allow the handicapped and widows to eat first and then onto the homeless children.

Each day I volunteered to help serve, I saw hundreds of people who were fed and thankful to be fed because hundred were turned away. When these people would come to the window for their injera (a spongy bread made from teff), I saw many emotions in their eyes. I saw lifeless eyes that looked as if every bit of hope and pride had been stripped from them. I saw exhausted eyes that reflected the likelihood that they had not slept in days. I saw fearful and pleading eyes. But the eyes that bore right into my soul

were the grateful eyes. The hungry person who would say “god bless you” and clutch onto my hand as I gave them their meager portion of injera.

One day I saw something that will stay with me forever. I went to watch the process of how the lunch organization leaders processed the people. Hundreds of people were squeezed shoulder to shoulder, in every nook and cranny of the alleyway entrance. They sat there patiently until I saw one old man try and skip ahead and squeeze into the line. He was immediately beaten with a stick by a one-legged man who worked as an organizer. I expect a fight to ensue, but, to my amazement, the old man slunked back to his place in line and sat there looking at the ground. It was clear to me that every ounce of human pride and ambition had been stripped from that man.



Worku. (Pictured: Lt. Col. Angela Roberts Stout (right) poses for a photos with a friend, Worku, whom she met while she was stationed in Ethiopia in support of the Global War on Terrorism).

I found after a few weeks that there were certain people that I would deal with each day. I decided that I would reach out to them and try to make their lives better. One person was my friend, Worku. Worku acted as the entrance guard to the facility where I worked. Every day, rain or shine, Worku would open and close the gate to the school and keep a watchful eye. It started as a simple gesture; I would give Worku some fruit. I would get upstairs and look out my office window and see him devour the fruit in no time flat. I then started giving him any leftovers I had from the night before. Once I gave him two pieces of pizza and he told my driver in Amharic to tell me, “Thank you for the gift.” Hard to imagine that my throwaway scraps would be considered a gift to

I then worked with my parents in America to send me a box of clothes that Worku might be able to wear. They went through their closets and found old coats and old t-shirts to mail to me. I brought Worku the box of clothes and told him it was a gift for him. He smiled this huge, toothy smile and said something in Amharic to me. The very next hour he had taken off his old rusty red coat full of holes and put on his beautiful navy blue jacket with red and white trim. He didn’t seem to way to know what the patch on the jacket that said “Air Force Sergeants Association -AFSA” meant, and I am sure the AFSA would be glad to have Worku wear their jacket!

I noticed that Worku walked a little taller (all 4’8” or him) and smiled a little bigger; when I left that day, he had written me an Amharic note in his little notepad he carried with him. He asked by driver to read it to me. It said, “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I pray for you and your parents every day. Thank you.” I will never forget Worku and he gave me more than anything I ever gave him.

I have been forever changed by my deployment! I will never again complain about having to stand in line for groceries – I will consider myself blessed that I have a grocery store, that I have a job and a means to provide for my family. I will never again complain about having to wait to get my seat in a restaurant – I will consider myself blessed that I can afford to go to a restaurant and will probably spend more on a single meal out than most Ethiopians earn in a month. I will never again complain about having to sit and wait in a doctor’s office or filling out health insurance information – I will consider myself blessed to be able to go to a hospital that is safe, clean and has trained professionals to treat my illness. I will consider myself blessed that I have insurance to pay for most of the care. I will not complain about paying land taxes – I will consider myself blessed that I live in a democratic nation that allows people to actually own land.

My list could go on and on. You may not consider yourself blessed, but let me encourage you to reconsider – you are truly blessed. If you don’t believe me, go visit Ethiopia and then you will understand.

Lt. Col. Stout is the daughter of Tommy and Gracie Roberts of the Roberts Switch Community of Putnam County, TN. She was born in Cookeville, TN and is a graduate of the U. S. Air Force Academy and has served for 20 years. Lt. Col. Stout is currently stationed in Montgomery, Ala., where she is an instructor at the Air Force's Air Command and Staff College. She is married to Mark Stout of Colorado Springs, Colo., and they have four daughters, Kelly, Megan, Sarah and Molly.

**See TOMMY ALLEN ROBERTS FAMILY – History Putnam Co., TN files at:*

<http://www.ajlambert.com>