

There was enormous human pain everywhere the team looked and very little that could be done about it. All Morrison and his partners could do was continue looking for their respective nationals. The roads, very bumpy following the earthquake and tsunami, were sometimes nearly impassable, even during the day. At night, with no streetlights working, driving was especially treacherous. It was often difficult even to get fuel for their vehicle.

Only adrenaline and dedication kept the team going, as they got little sleep due to the never-ending aftershocks and only had emergency rations to eat. "We were usually hungry, tired and a bit scared," says Morrison.

The third day, the group visited Kamaishi and Rikuzentakata, two coastal cities that had been obliterated by the tsunami. They now realized why Japanese authorities did not expect to find survivors in certain areas. There were boats on roofs, cars piled up in mounds and mud everywhere. "Rikuzentakata was the absolute worst," Morrison recalls. "It took our breath away—there was nothing. Just piles of wood and debris where houses once stood."

The officers travelling with him, along with U.S. and British counterparts, were all on the lookout for each other's unaccounted-for nationals. They helped any nationals who wished to leave the area or who needed other assistance. "It was a group effort," Morrison says. "The Brits found unaccounted-for Canadians, the Australians picked up some stranded Kiwi families, and we gave information about some Americans we encountered. This cooperation made a huge difference and was far more effective than trying to go it alone."

One of the most poignant moments concerned a New Zealander who was living in a part of the city of Kesenuma that was completely flooded by the tsunami. No one ever expected to find him but, miraculously, it turned out that he had been visiting friends who lived on high ground just outside the city on the day of the tsunami. "We were all ecstatic when we heard he was okay," Morrison recalls.

After eight days in the Sendai area, all Canadians who needed any form of consular service had been helped, and Morrison returned to the Tokyo embassy.

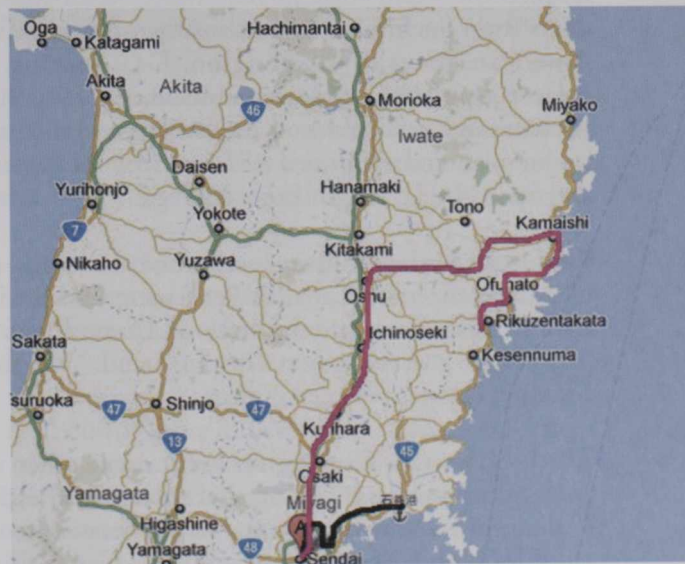
Embassy staff still appreciate his willingness to step in so selflessly in a moment of urgency. The embassy's management team unanimously nominated him for the 2011 Deputy Minister's Award of Excellence for Outstanding Contribution.

"Everyone at the embassy did a lot of heroic work during this 'perfect storm' of earthquake and tsunami and nuclear accident—but Brad was nominated as best reflecting our collective action during most difficult times," said head of mission Jonathan Fried. "His dedication to duty was extraordinary."

Morrison, who studied Japanese at university and has been living in Japan since 1997, seems set on staying in the country for the long haul. He is currently the senior consular officer at the embassy. "Working in the affected area reinforced for me the crucial importance of consular work," Morrison says. "Those times of tragedy are terrible but remind us that we're all part of the human family."



Devastation in Kamaishi - photo: Brad Morrison/DFAIT



Map showing team's route from city to city. Black line indicates trip from Sendai to Ishinomaki; pink shows route to Kamaishi and then Rikuzentakata.