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Saving Private Hashim

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Saving Private Hashim

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SOMETIMES, A SUBJECTIVE EVENT can focus our thinking the way objective knowledge cannot. The movie "Saving Private Ryan" had the extraordinary effect of causing millions of cinema fans around the world to marvel and, hopefully, to ponder the extent to which we sometimes go to protect the life and dignity of one individual. The premise was that the policy, strategy and resources of a major country at war could be altered in such a way to defy objective logic (risking far too much for one individual) for a limited goal, in this case—to ensure the viability of one family. It occurred to me that the same dedication should be considered for the "foot soldiers" of the mine action world—the demining operators.

Some time ago, I, perhaps callously, more likely out of ignorance, put deminers (detection and clearance personnel) into an all-encompassing category of mine action practitioner's writ large. Paramedics, geographic information specialists, logisticians, food handlers, technicians, psychologists, sociologists, health providers and deminers, I reasoned, were each important and all necessary for a successful mine action program. What I did not recognize was that the risks associated with mine detection and clearance personnel puts them into a category unlike any of the others. Of course, I realized that their situation was different, but I never consciously analyzed the ramifications of this difference until two events occurred.

The first was when I heard two researchers discussing the pros and cons of particular versions of

protective visors for deminers. When they had both had their say, a director of field operators who had been listening in the background quietly responded by saying that the deminers he supervised would opt against using either. Their reason? They would, he explained, much rather take an explosion full in the face and die quickly than to put up with hot, irritating visors, which would only protect the face partially and, perhaps, cause extra agony in case of an explosion. This bit of reasoning, whether logical or not, somehow humanized this argument, which is rarely represented on the podium of well-choreographed seminars and mine action conferences. Up to that point, I had always heard the (supposed) empirical analysis of personnel protective gear, not the mental reactions of the men and women who wear them.

The second milestone for me was when I read a university researcher's report examining the psychological effects of landmine accidents on surviving team members after a member of the demining team had been seriously injured or killed by a mine explosion. Professor Echterling, in his "Critical Stress Incident Debriefing Guide," made the point that deminers, like firemen or policemen, can undergo serious mental turbulence in the aftermath of such a tragedy. The chilling effect of such an incident might not only traumatize individual mine clearers, but it might result in a kind of contagious reluctance to return to work or to continue with mine clearance altogether.

The importance of the effects of these observations has led me to conclude that we need to take a "Private Ryan" or, more appropriately, a "Private Hashim" view of the mine action world. That is, since the clearers and detectors are the "shock troops" of mine action, they need to be protected and considered to an extent, which outweighs their political clout or their simple economic worth. Deminers are not a particularly articulate or diplomatic group of people; they are literally the "guys at the pointy end of the stick."

It is because of this fact that those of us in the landmine information, policy, management, strategic and logistic businesses should pay special heed to

the safety and effectiveness of this largely silent but critically important group.

This is not to imply that the research and development community has not continually had the interest of these operators upper most in mind—it has. Innovative thinkers like Dr. James Trevelyan, Colin King and Andy Smith have helped create an unofficial network of requirements and resources that help manufacturers and mine action organizations create new and modified protective equipment. The donor countries and their R&D institutions have paid particular attention to the need for personnel protective equipment. Because they have funded research, development projects have produced many enhanced products.

Most often, it is the local operator who fine tunes a basic equipment package and makes it more effective in a specific environment. Thus, local operators such as Hendrik Ehlers (MgM, Angola) can modify equipment while an organization like Med-Eng Systems Inc. may consider local modifications for future designs of its products. It is this kind of exchange and feedback between local operators and manufacturers that we encourage and see as the best way to fashion new and effective gear. And it is the support of that process by donors and policy makers that will make it possible. It is to this spirit of dedication to the deminer and cooperation among diverse organizations within the international mine action community that this issue of the Journal is dedicated. ■

Without [deminers], the entire finely orchestrated global fabric that is mine action would rot and rip apart. Policy goals, donor vision and management objectives would all go unfulfilled without the operator at the lowest level doing the riskiest job in the mine action business.