Bombs Away: A Proactive Approach

UXO clearance in Guam and the Pacific Islands is considered mostly "emergency removal." The Journal examines how improper disposal, fatalities and a lack of survey or accident data compounds the problem for this region.

by Lisa M. Vanada, *MAIC*

In 1941, Japanese forces invaded Guam, making it the only populated U.S. territory to endure foreign occupation. Three years later the United States recovered Guam and drove the Japanese from the island. The bloodshed from the conflict continues throughout Guam, Saipan, Tinian and Palau over 50 years later, due to the UXO and landmines that still pollute the islands. Although the United States provides mine clearance services to the area, Paul Murray, president of Bombs Away, a UXO-specializing firm primarily servicing Micronesia and Southeast Asia, expressed his concern that this mine action may not be sufficient.

The U.S. military EOD teams participate in over 225 emergency UXO/landmine clearance operations in Guam every year. Unfortunately, this figure only reflects situations where emergency assistance was specifically requested. The Navy EOD unit stationed on Guam sends a six-man EOD detachment as a response team only; they are not authorized to locate and clear mines under their own initiative. This means that hundreds of undetected mines lay in wait. Murray demonstrated his frustration with a question: "How do you think most of these mines are found?" The mine-related death and injury statistics provide the answer: children and construction workers frequently find these mines, often with fatal results.

The U.S. military estimates that 25 percent of all ordnance used during World War II failed to detonate as intended. In spite of ongoing clearance, mines still litter Pacific Island battle sites. Murray believes the demining process could be greatly accelerated with a proactive mine clearance approach that encompasses thoroughness, historical research and initiative.

Background

As a former member of U.S. Navy EOD teams, Paul Murray has extensive military demining experience. He was awarded the Navy Commendation for Valor after disarming over 60 Iraqi sea mines, demolition traps and anti-shipping mines, and he was deployed on numerous diving and demolition exercises throughout Asia. After being stationed in Guam, Murray decided to settle there. In 1994, a friend asked him to help with mine clearance in the southern tip of Saipan. The friend had taken a team to survey the region, which was used as a munitions dump after World War II. Although a B29 explosion destroyed many of the munitions in a 1946 crash, the team found an overwhelming amount of UXO, for which it needed demining assistance.

This was the start of Bombs Away, Inc., a multi-service firm specializing in UXO, diving and geophysical testing technologies. The UXO services encompass historical research, which is used to determine potential UXO locations and contamination levels; site assessment and surveys; UXO clearance and disposal; UXO safety and awareness training; and the development of policy and procedure manuals for UXO response. Murray's opinions regarding inefficient demining techniques are substantiated by his experiences and observations in Micronesia and Southeast Asia.

Past and Future Problems

Mine clearance activities in the Pacific Islands are often unregulated or loosely regulated. The lack of government support frequently correlates with improper UXO disposal. Without a designated disposal site, cleared materials are simply dumped in a convenient location, which is often an empty neighboring plot that will be developed at a later date. When a company or individual decides to develop the neighboring plot, the mines will need to be moved again. This system wastes time, increases danger and could easily be avoided with better disposal choices.

There are no government policies in Palau for the disposal of bombs, so contractors find it easy to cut corners. Murray related a situation clarifying that bomb disposal is not simply a matter of carelessness, but is one of convenience. A Bombs Away team was hired by a civilian

contractor to clear bombs from a channel. The contractor wanted to dredge the channel through the mangroves, but it was contaminated with 500-pound bombs. Bombs Away divers placed slings beneath the bombs and used diving regulators to fill lift balloons and float the bombs to the water's surface. It would have been simple to discard the bombs in a nearby uninhabited forest. Instead, the team took the time and effort to transport the bombs across the town to a remote munitions dump.

UXO disposal problems also exist in Guam. Construction companies are rapidly developing the island to clear the land for businesses and homes. Because there are few regulations, many construction companies focus primarily on immediate profit, and little concern is given to the next developer. Murray said that the workers "dig up UXO and throw it on the next piece of undeveloped property." This method may remove the danger from a specific area but it adds to the UXO problems in the remaining land. Government regulations and professional standards must be altered to consider the long-term affects of mine action.

Initiative with Historical Research

History and statistics indicate that the Pacific Rim is heavily contaminated with UXO, but many of the governments lack solid policies and mine action support. Guam was the site of some of the heaviest pre-invasion bombardment in World War II. The island endured heavy bombing and shelling for several weeks prior to the U.S. military's land invasion, and millions of ordnance items were scattered throughout the Pacific Rim. Dud rates conclude that 25 percent of the ordnance failed to detonate, and these abandoned items present a high risk to local residents. If the governments and existing mine clearance organizations would adopt a proactive stance, the risk for children and civilians would decrease.

Some of the existing safety policies produce negativity among the workers, who consider some of the policies extraneous and contradictory. Demining workers are exasperated by safety inspections that involve citations for workers without a plastic hat or steel-toed boots; they think that a government concerned with these types of details should focus on the life-threatening potential of the mines. Murray thinks the overall safety of the islands could be increased if the deminers applied proactive methods. Job specifications could be improved with research and should include history, terrain and prior mine activity. Reliable safety precautions, such as UXO sweeps prior to earthmoving, should also be incorporated.

Murray emphasizes the role history plays as a UXO indicator and admitted that he has yet to understand why the government infrequently initiates clearance operations on major battle sites known for UXO contamination. The beaches on the west coast of Guam near Agat were stormed frequently during World War II. As a known area of conflict, the risk for UXO contamination in that region is high. After a heavy rainstorm, a Chamorro (native) boy found a hand grenade in the sand. Although it was compromised by moisture, the grenade began smoking when he picked it up. He immediately threw it 20 feet away, but the weak explosion injured his foot. Most government and military mine operations are formed as a response to a recent call, not a response to the problem that was created 55 years ago. Emphasis should be placed on initiative, and the governments should use historical records and Chamorro reports to proactively clear mines and prevent accidents.

Cooperation and Support

Although successful demining projects rely on technical expertise, training, experience and extensive

research, the overall success of mine action hinges on community support and cooperation. Mine action is a humanitarian and life-preserving effort, but if demining projects infringe on a resource valued by the community, support for demining will be diminished instead of increased. The public voice plays a crucial role in government decisions and regulations: If deminers seek a balance between public opinion and mine clearance activities, the resulting positive publicity can only benefit the global mine action community.

The significant role of public opinion was demonstrated by an incident in Sonsonaya Bay, Rota. As part of the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI), Rota currently flourishes from the diving industry. Tourists and divers form a substantial economic force that the island depends on for profit. Divers swim around sunken ships that have nearly been enveloped by coral, but unexploded depth charges are still partially visible. The ships and depth charges are remnants from World War II, when two Japanese submarine chasers anchored in the bay. Allied forces flying over the bay dropped leftover bombs on the Japanese ships before they landed at Tinian. These wooden Japanese ships were unoccupied when they sank, and as submarine chasers they contained the depth charges, which Murray describes as similar in appearance to a 50-gallon drum.

The government of Rota sent a removal request to the Navy EOD unit, fearing the depth charges presented a risk for the local diving community. The Navy EOD team that arrived to survey the depth charges also observed a few bombs in the sunken ships. They were authorized by Rota to return and blow up the bombs. The Navy returned with 25 team members; they destroyed the bombs but also devastated the coral gardens and killed a rare hawksbill turtle. The resulting public furor was immense: the diving community was outraged and protested the return of the Navy EOD team. Unfortunately, six depth charges remained on the ships.

Murray contacted the governor of the CNMI and, after providing his qualifications, informed him that if the ships were unoccupied and at anchor when they were bombed there would be no fuses. Murray relies on historical and military research and experience. He knew that unoccupied ships at anchor never store fuses with ordnance. After diving and confirming the absence of fuses, the Bombs Away diving team chipped the depth charges out of the reef using rebar with a filed edge. The six bombs were then rolled onto a tuna net and hauled to the surface for disposal.

Interestingly, the Sonsonaya Bay project received a great deal of notoriety not for the actual demining effort, but for the methods used to extract the depth charges and preserve the underwater environment. Environmental supporters and the diving community lauded the Rota government for revising its clearance effort. By cooperating with the community and endorsing a mine clearance method that maintained the natural tourist attraction, the government succeeded in alleviating a known risk while promoting environment-friendly demining. Local newspapers and journalists further publicized the project and the cooperative demining effort raised public UXO awareness in a positive way.

Mine Action for the Pacific Rim

The lack of government regulations and widespread concern for mine contamination in the Pacific Rim leaves a problem without a clear solution. The islands and Chamorro people are left with a World War II legacy that is dissolving slowly, for although mine action is offered as a response to injuries and unprofessional discoveries, little initiative is taken to locate and clear most of the islands.

Without efficient UXO removal, Murray's pointed question remains, "How do you think most of these mines are found?" Hundreds of injured or surviving civilians attest to the risk these islanders face every day. To change the answer to this question, mine action in the Pacific Rim must be proactive, thorough and cooperative. Active collaboration between the government and demining organizations could promote effective long-term mine clearance. By consolidating effort and resources, they could accelerate the process of eradicating the remnants from a history of unwelcome invaders. ■

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