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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 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 bags and hoist 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 island. 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. Duds 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 negative among the workers, who consider some of the policies extraneous and contradictory. Demining workers are exposed to 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
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 ensuing 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. The government succeeded in alleviating a known risk while maintaining the natural tourist attraction, the island's significant and prosperous 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.

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Murray contacted the governor of the CNMI, as well as the Western Pacific Demining Foundation, the Navy, and the government of Guam for assistance in removing the depth charges. The Japanese ships were sunken, and as submarine chasers they contained the depth charges, which Murray describes as similar in appearance to a 50-gallon drum. lottery. Since then, there have been no unexploded depth charges reported in the area, and the diving community has been protected. The government of Rota has made it clear that they will not allow unexploded depth charges to remain in the Bay.

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. Environmentalists opposed the diving team's actions, feeling that the government succeeded in alleviating a known risk while promoting environment-friendly demining. Local newspapers and television stations 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 unexploded ordnance invaders.

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By Tim Grant, Landmine Photographer

Landmines are insidious devices. A landmine can be any munition placed under, on or near the ground or on other surface layer that is designed to be detonated or exploded by the presence, proximity or contact of a person or vehicle. Their main purpose is to inflict severe injury on the "enemy" so as to hinder advance and undermine the morale. Only a few mines are designed to kill outright. For every combatant injured it takes another two soldiers to carry them, effectively taking up to three fighters out of the battle.

My initial experiences with landmines came as an employee of the Land Mine Awareness Programme (LMAP) that started in 1999 on the Thai/Cambodian border. After testing the education materials we had produced, it was found that: the people wanted to see photographs of real mines and of landmine victims. The mines reproduced in the photographs were always shown as close as possible to their actual size. After several years of working in mine awareness, we found that photographs were very popular, generating much more interest than illustrations because people can relate more to them, especially when the images are taken in areas familiar to them. Photographing my first mine was an experience I shall always remember. At that time, it was illegal for foreigners...