Field Trip With MARMINCA

Margaret S. Busé
"What happens," the Mayor said, "is that you get someone who knows a little about mines and then everyone wants the local "expert" to come and clear the land for them. They buy them drinks and tell them how good they are at demining just to get them going and promise to pay them, and the person gets hurt or killed. People who fall for that line and think they know all are not going to be the right sort of people to do the work anyway."

"Not far from where José lives is the town of Mohahue where another local amateur deminer, Erasmo Ochoa, had cleared land for a large landowner who promised that he would pay Ochoa well. After removing 200 mines from a dense three-row strip, the landowner would only pay $200 and Erasmo went away disgusted and swearing he would never touch a mine again. The extremes of rural poverty in Nicaragua may force him to change his mind.

José strikes me as different from these others who cleared mines for payment. He only demined for himself and was clearly a man who knew his own mind and would not be talked into anything. As a member of an evangelical church, he doesn’t drink and before beginning the work, he tried to get some help. As he explained: "When I started I went to the local army HQ and asked for help, and the people I talked to showed me how to disarm these mines, but I didn’t really trust what I learned." This caution is a surprise as the PMN is an easy mine to disarm.

So how did he dispose of the mines? "I carefully dropped them into deep holes, one by one. It took me over two months to move the mines. I carried them on my shovel held as far away from my body as possible, and I put about 150 over there in a deep trench, another 100 there in a hole about 3m (10 feet) deep and a lot down an old pit latrine that was over 3m deep. No one else knows where they are except my wife. If I told anyone, then people [would] start to dig them up again for fishing."

One day, of course, someone is going to have to dig up those mines to dispose of them properly, but that is in the future, and José is more than happy to leave final disposal to the experts. As I took one last photo before departing, he smiled and repeated: "I don’t regret doing it."

Contact Information

Russell Gower
Joseph Rowereeiquer Facker, 15 Osborne Ave, Ashley Hill
Bristol, UK, BS7 9BL
Tel: +44 (0) 117 377 9939
E-mail: RG@trellick.net
Website: www.trellick.net/landmines

Field Trip With MARMINCA

In the field with the deminers of MARMINCA, the editor of the JMA was able to witness first-hand how centralized demining practices are coordinated and carried out in Central America.

by Margaret S. Busé, Editor

The organized approach to mine action in Central America results in a uniform, controlled and highly organized method in demining. All aspects of demining operations are supervised by MARMINCA and carried out by the national armies/security forces. Once a country is approved for demining operations through the OAS, supervisors are trained, dispatched and placed in a supervisory role over the local army at various fronts of operation in each country.

Colonel Luis E. Ramos, chief of all of MARMINCA’s operations in Central America, stresses that the strength of MARMINCA is that of a humanitarian mission under the IADB. The OAS supplies equipment, training, donor funding and coordination for all mine action operations. Donors contribute or pick up the cost for the demining of area specific modules that comprise a front of operation.

The Supervisors have a unique, consistent and significant role in MARMINCA, and they are the cornerstone of the efficiency of the centralized demining operations in Central America. They have a one-year tour of duty as supervisor. There are currently 30 Supervisors working in Central America, with 19 operating in Nicaragua. The supervisors come from the following countries: 11 from Brazil, three from Guatemala, four from Hondurans, three from Venezuela, four from El Salvador, three from Colombia, two from Bolivia. The Supervisors’ mission tasks to:

- Train new deminers with the help of U.S Special Forces
- Give technical assistance with equipment, explosives and destruction of mines
- Guarantee that demining practices meet international standards
- Update demining data received from different locations and prepare weekly and monthly reports that are sent to the IADB.
- The Supervisors are in charge of the Tabla de Chequeos (checklist)
- Certify demined areas
- Captain Carbajo of Brazil referred to the Table of Chequeos as their "bible." The Table of Chequeos is an adaptation of the international standard for the entire demining mission in Central America. It is updated every year based on the supervisors’ experiences after nine months in the field. Based on the Tabla de Chequeos they develop specific Procedimientos Operativos Normal (PON) or standard operating procedures, for each aspect of the mission. MARMINCA has PONs for medical, destruction of mines, demining/emergency clearance operations and communications. It should be noted that they have already incorporated the new international standards into their operations.

Captain Siquiera of Brazil feels it is important to update the checklist because it is based on what everyone has seen in the camps and it has direct practical applications. The checklist is especially important for new deminers in the field. Every front of operation has different characteristics whether it is terrain or area to be cleared, i.e. mountains (or high tension towers) vs. bridges. All aspects are taken into consideration and are accounted for in the checklist.

To update the Tabla de Chequeos, and to aid in maintaining accurate demining records, MARMINCA requires that the supervisors record their demining experiences daily—square meters of area demined, mines found, metal found, accidents etc. These
records are sent to MARMINCA daily where they are analysed and given to operations to be analysed again. They also give data to the PADCA-OAS office to be entered into MIRMA. Any discrepancies are discussed before the information goes into a final report for the IADB.

In Nicaragua, where I visited, there are five fronts of operation supervised by MARMINCA. Approximately 70,000 mines still litter the country and landmines are everywhere.
The First Front, San Miguelito, is a small front with one international supervisor and operates out of offices of the fourth front at Ocotal.
The Second Front, Abisnias, has four platoons working in Abisnias and the Fita del Camino. It is supervised by the MARMINCA office at Juigalpa.
The Third Front, Juigalpa, is predominantly bridges and electrical towers. There are 60 towers, 36 of which have been certified as cleared. The mines in this area were laid by the Sandinistas to prevent economic sabotage by the Contras.
The Fourth Front, Ocotal, comprises the border area between Nicaragua and Honduras. This contains the largest mined area. There are problems with weather conditions, fog and rain and the terrain is rocky, which makes movement difficult.
The Fifth Front, Santa, is in a remote area of Nicaragua that used to be a gold mining area. This north Atlantic region still has an insurgent group, Frente Unido Andres Castro (FUAC) that is prone to violence.

While I was in Juigalpa there were two violent outbreaks in the fifth front in a 72-hour period. Because it is a sparsely populated area, it is easy for the guerrillas to melt back into the population and into the mountains. As I was returning to the US, a joint military and police operation was expected to be deployed to quell the fighting. Captain Decio of Brazil is one of the supervisors of this area. They are currently working southward of Malakukku but are slated to start work in the northern area next. He says they cannot start demining operations until the fighting has ceased.

Organization of a Front of Operation

The Third Front, Juigalpa, Nicaragua
There are 4 platoons (pelones de zapadores), 4-dog teams, a medical team and a communications team comprising the operation of the third front. Captain Curti, the Brazilian coordinator of this front of operation, described their methods. The detonator uses the metal detector and the dog to locate the device. The flagman, chief of the zapadores who destroys it in situ. Some of the mines they are dealing with are 20 years old and are too fragile to move to destroy at another site. There are two zapadores and two zapadores in a platoon, each platoon is made up of 25 squads.

Captain Curti also described the three levels of operation within a demining front.

Levels of Demining

Level I: An area is recognized as suspicious either based on a survey, mine field map or by reports from the local community. At this point, they do not enter the area, but they do all the background research needed for carrying out a survey. They review combat maps, look at incident reports, but are looking forward to returning home in September. Captain Wilson of Brazil is the supervisor for the Costa Rica operations. Because he and Captain Decio, also of Brazil, spoke the best English, they did translating when needed, including ordering my lunch. The fresh ground tortillas, plantains and the sweet and thick fruit drinks were exotic to me and delicious.

The drive to the field operation went quickly as Captain Decio described the area surrounding the electrical towers that were being demined. The landscape was dotted with small shelters. Cattle, pigs and horses roamed freely, often directly in front of our car. We reached the demining site and electrical towers stretched into the horizon. The terrain was rolling grassland with small low-growing trees and shrubs. The weather was hot, humid and dry even though this was the rainy season.

In The Field

MARMINCA’s field operation headquarters updating the Table de Chogos. Many were eager to practice their English and conversations about demining operations could still be communicated. After a morning spent on detailed briefings by Captain Curti and Captain Siquiera, we walked the cobblestone streets of Juigalpa for lunch in a small restaurant that the MARMINCA staff frequents. The supervisors talked frankly about the stresses of demining. Many were looking forward to returning home in September. Captain Wilson of Brazil is the supervisor for the Costa Rica operations. Because he and Captain Decio, also of Brazil, spoke the best English, they did translating when needed, including ordering my lunch. The fresh ground tortillas, plantains and the sweet and thick fruit drinks were exotic to me and delicious.

The drive to the field operation went quickly as Captain Decio described the area surrounding the electrical towers that were being demined. The landscape was dotted with small shelters. Cattle, pigs and horses roamed freely, often directly in front of our car. We reached the demining site and electrical towers stretched into the horizon. The terrain was rolling grassland with small low-growing trees and shrubs. The weather was hot, humid and dry even though this was the rainy season.