Behind the Scenes of Mine Action

Mina Action work involves numerous dangers and risks. Yet the field of Mine Action and the stark beginnings of a mine action center often begin with wounds. Stories from men involved in demining show what life is like handling munitions, and setting up and running mine programs.

By Mary Ruberry, MAIC

Introduction

"Because they were shooting at our building, we decided to have our coffee on the floor. It was very good coffee, and they were still shooting at us, so we decided to have another cup." Thad Bollinger of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) relayed his mine action story blithely, illustrating a fairly typical attitude of the rare breed of men who establish and run mine action centers around the world. Mine action workers aren't looking for danger, but are undeniably engaged in a very dangerous line of work.

As the stories of these men often show, maintaining a sense of humor has served them well in facing stress and fatigue.

Gathering stories from the field has resulted in a compilation of absurd, hilarious, stressful, horrifying, heart-wrenching and noble accounts that allow a glimpse into the everyday tasks of a profession in which death maintains a specter of possibility. Formal training to prepare for a career in mine action and demining exists primarily through military experience. Almost all the gentlemen who contributed to this article have a military background, with the exception of Hendrik Ehlers of MgM.

The Charity of Men against Landmines (CAML). Nevertheless, as Paddy Blagden of GICHD points out, military mine field "sleeping" is far afield from humanitarian demining. In the last two decades humanitarians, some heavily involved in Afghanistan, many lessons have been learned the hard way, and the experiences of mine action pioneers have resulted in a new set of standards that provide a foundation for the future.

Cowboys and Heroes

"Someone just had to get in there and rescue him," John Kirby of the Ocean Group (known by most as Jabba) describes his experience saving an 81-year-old man from a mine field in Mankunan, Zimbabwe. He had lost four litres of blood by the time we got him to Karanda Hospital. "With 20 years of experience in bomb disposal and mine clearance, John Kirby's act of risking his life to save another's is not out of character, but part of his line of work."

The term "cowboy" has been coined in reference to wild and reckless ways, and has subsequently been applied to mine action professionals for some of their "larger-than-life" experiences. Illustrating Hendrik Ehlers in his tank on his novice mining run in Angola does conjure cowboy-like images. "So, with my life-long friend, Hans Georg Kruesen, we took off for Angola where we were going to drive demobilization, ex-East German army tanks into mine belts. We knew nothing about landmines until we found ourselves surrounded by ten thousand TM-57s." Ehlers said that he is not really a cowboy because he has technical and managerial background. Yet in the mid 1990s he founded a club called the Landmine Cowboys. You had to be somebody to be a Cowboy. Apparently the 30 badges that were distributed are now considered collectors items. About the cowboy image, Blagden commented, "Actually they're not cowboys because cowboys take a lot of risks. Mine cleaners take no risks they can avoid. However, Ehlers points out, "No sane person would voluntarily go out to find what the borders of a mine field are.

Starting From Scratch

"Souls can be thought of as a mine action center, and I make my hat off to all those people working in them throughout the world."

Willie Lawrence's tribute to MAC is well-founded in light of the dramatic challenges encountered setting one up in a post-conflict situation. As Paddy Blagden says, "Life is not always easy when you start a demining center. What people don't realize when they say 'I'm surprised that you didn't set things up quicker' is how infrequently difficult it was to set up anything with the complete lack of power, of sanitation, of any amenity and it was a battle looking out for yourself and making sure you were fed and alive."

In Bosnia, "We were ready to go, but we needed somebody to put our tiny bottoms, preferably with little things like electricity and sanitation if you could possibly manage it. And, boy, a telephone would really be fun. But this didn't happen that way."

J.J. van der Merwe of the U.N.'s Office for Project Services describes setting up the Bosnia MAC in 1996. "You arrive in a country, there is nothing. The whole city was bombed out. And then you have to find a premises, you have to set up your office, you have to negotiate your lease agreement, you have to buy the furniture, and hire staff, and all has to be done in the U.N.'s way, and of course we were unfamiliar with the U.N."

After being offered a bombed-out "university building" to house the MAC, the Bosnian team ended up building the office themselves out of "corrugated" containers, rubber-like containers used for shipping. As van der Merwe describes, "These are containers that have been turned into offices. Some of them are collapsible so you can actually take out some of the panels, and you can put two togther."

Van der Merwe notes, "These are containers that have been turned into offices. Some of them are collapsible so you can actually take out some of the panels, and you can put two together."

"I was 18,000 records which the former warring factions gave us of mined areas. These 18,000 records had to be entered into the database. And there are so many other things like normal/administrative things that you have to catch up before you can actually say 'now I'm ahead' and 'now I can sit back and just go.'"

Military Training and Fear

Mina Action workers also put in long days. In Kuwait, Paddy Blagden's staff worked "about 16 hours per day, seven days per week."

J.J. van der Merwe explains, "When you're setting up a mine action program, there's not much time to take off for recreation. You're basically working seven days a week. I don't want to exaggerate, but up to 18 hours a day."

"As van der Merwe notes, "This was pre-international standards. You would write the guidelines yourselves, you would develop the database. And then there would be, according to the information you had at that stage, the design of the program, the different mines of demining assets and things that you needed because you would have to plan a site or issue a plan on how to address this problem very soon because again you are reliant on donor funding, and if you don't do it quickly enough, the donors might go somewhere else."

Van der Merwe recommends the endless tasks associated with constantly reviewing budgets and organizing information. "We had 18,000 records which the former warring factions gave us of mined areas. These 18,000 records had to be entered into the database. And there are so many other things like normal/administrative things that you have to catch up before you can actually say 'now I'm ahead' and 'now I can sit back and just go.'"
outside and the other troops were on me to put the fire out.

The mine fuse penetrated the vehicle and hit Tadd, and gasoline was sucked into the cab. The three men sitting around von der Merwe died in the incident, but he jumped quickly out of the vehicle and was able to command directing his troops to prepare for an expected ambush. The ambush didn’t come, but fortunately men at the base saw the explosion and sent a rescue and recovery center. ‘I lay in the hospital for a day and a half for them to stabilize me before I was Medevac’d back to Pretoria.’ He then spent three months in intensive care recovering from 2nd and 3rd degree burns.

Was von der Merwe’s response of getting right back to what needed to be done—though severely injured—a result of his military training? ‘It probably could have, I don’t think what you do, it was part of the reason why I never had any nightmares. It was very fortunate. Even till today, I only black out at night and sit up with a nightmare.’

Regarding his military foundation, Paddy Blishead says, ‘It serves you well because it makes you fairly tough. And obviously you’re used to making decisions and you’re used to looking after yourself. What kids does it help stay a sense of survival. What you do to do becomes emotionally clearer. What’s that military training or not, I don’t know. All I know is that in my case and in several other people’s cases that I know of, that’s how it happens.’

Daniel Eriksson of the Kosovo Mine Action Centre comments that the ‘only really scary moment’ was the first time he demined a minefield. ‘Then he was “scared and wondering what am I doing here?”’ He says he was frightened only by what was going on in his mind.

Willie Lawrence’s experience with terror was very real and lasting in the face. Now with MineTech, Lawrence was 18 when he saw two friends ripped apart by a bomb in Northern Ireland. ‘Also frightening was looking at John Spigg’s bomb-blamed face a few moments after the detonation and realizing that there was virtually nothing I could do for the victim, anything easier for him to do was not in our hands. And it was our own fault and Daniel quickly released himself completely and helped me to remove the ropes around my ankles. Scrambling to our feet and watching the blast, we knew that our only option was to barricade ourselves into a room and fortunately we were next to the ideal location, a small room containing a counter that sat there.’

‘Dani moved into the room ahead of me and as I turned to close the door I saw one of the gang just three metres behind me, he had returned so quietly we were lucky to have moved when we did! I pushed one second the freezer door and could see we had blown our cover on the floor out of [the] line of fire from the door and exterior window. We heard the car engine start and they drove off. Discussing it afterwards, I was in the opinion that we had in fact done a very good job in the work in the same area. Everybody else had gone home. So I stayed behind and cleaned up everything I found and buried it. You can never tell; there are a lot of people who had helped and supported me will remain in my mind, reflects Lawrence about his life in mine action. Philip Parsons says, ‘Mine action contains a fellowship of like-minded and dedicated people. It is a pleasure to work in this group, and to know that I have long-term friendships from mine action.’

As von der Merwe highlights, ‘You have to find humor in any kind of situation. ’ Blishead agrees. ‘To offer the fact that, “Actual mine clearance itself is dull,” he enjoyed the jokes and the private things that we make for ourselves. Some of the jokes that we had were appallingly funny and in fact one chap came into our organization once, and we were always falling about with laughter, and he said how can you be laughing so much when you’re demining? So I said, well, you know, either you’re laughing or you’re not, and you can’t be a bit of both, but I think you’re one of the things, I can’t think I’m just a part of something good—perhaps even excellent.’

Contact Information
MAC
MSC 8504
One Court Square
Harrisonburg, VA 22807
Tel: (540) 568-2718
E-mail: maci@mac.edu