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An Interview With Colin King

Colin King is a graduate of Sandhurst. He served 14 years in the British Army, gaining extensive knowledge of explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), and served both as an instructor at the British EOD School and as the sole EOD analyst for the Ministry of Defense for six years. He founded an EOD consultancy company, which conducts assessments, training and operational trials worldwide. He is also the editor of Jane’s Mines and Mine Clearance.

by Margaret Busé, Editor

Margaret Busé (MB): Can you tell me about training the Afghan deminers?

Colin King (CK): I think it was really the first major UN demining initiative. The deminers were all mujahideen, and they were sent to one of two training centers. I led one of two teams based in Quetta, which was just on the border in Pakistan in the southern desert region; then there was another center in Peshawar to the north. Looking back, the program was very basic. It was totally focused on training people to remove mines, UXO and booby traps. There was really no attention to the other aspects of mine action—and none of the support functions or quality assurance; none of that was really thought about in those days.

MB: Who did your assessments when you went in?

CK: This program was purely about training deminers for mine and UXO clearance. There was little thought at that time as to which areas they would be going into, prioritizing tasks or what equipment they would use. They were basically sent in with a bag of hand tools, a kid’s $10 Radio Shack metal detector and not much else.

MB: When did you start your demining efforts?

CK: My first experience with mines was the Falklands. The actual Falklands war was in 1982, and I went there two years later. Then two years after that, I commanded all bomb disposal operations on the island, including responsibility for the minefields. We basically tried to keep the minefields under control by going after mines that had moved, or were in danger of moving, and responding to emergency calls on mines and other UXO.

MB: You’re talking from 1984 to 2003, almost 20 years. Can you tell me how mine action has changed from where it was when you first started to where it is today?

CK: To me, one of the most obvious changes is the adoption of PPE [Personal Protective Equipment], which just wasn’t a prominent issue when I first started. It was available, but in the army, we mainly wore protective equipment for terrorist bomb disposal; we rarely bothered with it for anything to do with mines. We didn’t wear it at anytime during operations in the Falklands, and I didn’t use PPE for many years afterwards. It wasn’t really until my friend Paul Jefferson got severely injured in Kuwait that the issue was properly highlighted.

MB: PPE was not used for military clearance or humanitarian demining?

CK: It just wasn’t something that people recognized as a significant consideration in the early days. That changed, I think, as the casualties built up during the post-war clearance in the Gulf. Paul was the first major British casualty among the clearance teams, and that incident made a lot of people stop and think.

MB: Could you tell me about the accident?

CK: Paul was a very good friend of mine. He and I were in the army together and worked in the same unit of the EOD Regiment; we also handed over commands in the Falklands. I stayed in the army when Paul left and went to Kuwait, where he was by far the most highly qualified technical expert working there. He stepped on a mine and was severely injured; he lost a leg and was completely blinded. A few years later, I was an expert witness when he brought a court case against his employers; he claimed that they failed to provide adequate protective equipment—eye protection, in particular. It was absolutely true, but then to be fair, very few people bothered with any form of PPE at that time. He won the case, but regardless of the rights or wrongs, the fact was that it...
The primary resource in this business is people and, thankfully, we have a lot of good people making steady progress.

CB. What about the tools in the toolbox and how all they integrate in their ability to assist the deminer? What are they evolving into?

CR. There's a lot of talk about the toolbox approach, but in many cases, it's meaningless; in reality, most deminers simply have to use whatever equipment has been issued. You don't often see a program manager going to an area saying, "Ah, just haven't gotten this equipment." If they have this equipment, which is available, there is a lot of talk about it. So, do they evolve?

MB. How do you have the tools that the deminers use evolve over the last 20 years?

CB. It all started with whatever military tools were available, still primarily the magnetic detector and the probe. In some cases, the probe would be the biggest, and there are still a lot of military units that favor using the bayonet. You must be familiar with the evolution of protective equipment, metal detectors, probes and other tools for cutting vegetation or clearing unexploded mines, that have improved over the years, become more modern, more sophisticated, more automated...the whole equipment line.

CB. How are you thinking about the tools of tomorrow?

CR. The main driver is a tremendous growth in the use of robots, and that is absolutely fundamental in terms of the military programs. There is a tremendous amount of money spent in a good direction, two-thirds of which is being done in the United States.

MB. What do you think of some of the challenges of training deminers?

CR. I think this is actually the easiest part of the job. When you train the deminers, they become very predictable, very isolated individuals. They don't travel from one place to another, so to speak, unless they go to the next line of demine the next day or two days later in a different area. However, training is a long-term, expensive and unfunded effort that is not an easy job. It is something that is not easily funded, and it is not easy to get the funding for.

MB. Where do you see the new technology going? Do you think that's money wasted or do you feel that's money spent in a good direction?

CR. I think there's been a tremendous amount of money wasted. But it's not bad because there's been such a tremendous amount of money that was spent in the past to get us to where we are today. But what we need is more effective, more reliable equipment.

MB. What has the impact been on the people of the countries where you're working?

CR. There are a lot of demons, really. Another thing that has changed over the last years is that mine action is no longer seen as a stand-alone activity. It has to be seen as an integral part of any development plan. There are the major issues such as political support, the lack of coordination and funding, but you get down to the fundamental issues of understanding the problem. The better you understand it, the more focused and better informed your solution can be. That requires large amount of surveys, which are a step-by-step has led to the last 20 years—even though people largely have not agreed on what it means. What is agreed on is that it makes good sense to have a regional overview before you do that. In other words, you don't have a regional overview before you do that. But the regional overview is absolutely fundamental to mine action.

CR. Where do you see the new equipment going? Do you think that's money wasted or do you feel that's money spent in a good direction?

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