Demining During Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan

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Demining During Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan

The U.S. and Coalition forces' occupation of airfields at Bagram and Kandahar in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom was initially hampered by the presence of a large number of mines and UXO in both the immediate and surrounding areas. In the airfields, U.S. and Coalition forces quickly came to understand that traditional countermine demining operations were insufficient to ensure troop habitability and operational safety in the base area, a situation not foreseen or provided for in current U.S. Army doctrine. This experience strongly suggests that the U.S. Army should assess its current countermine doctrine and introduce a doctrinal modification to take into account the future need to deal with mines and UXO in and around base areas.

by John L. Wilkinson, Vice President, Operations, RONCO Consulting Corporation

Introduction

In many ways, Operation Enduring Freedom has diverged from the usual pattern of U.S. and Coalition military operations that developed since the Vietnam War. Where there usually was a smiley face such as Urgent Fury in Grenada or Just Cause in Panama, or much larger scale operations such as Desert Shield/Desert Storm in the Gulf or Allied Force in Serbia, the usual pattern since the 1970s has been one of mounting operations into enemy territory from friendly territory, and the usual pattern has not been to occupy enemy territory for extended periods of time. While Operation Enduring Freedom did as did the others mentioned above, with the collapse of the Taliban government, Marine, U.S. Army and Coalition forces occupied Bagram and Kandahar airfields inside Afghanistan. Both have since been used as semi-permanent operational bases from which to conduct further military operations against the remnants of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan and adjoining border areas with Pakistan.

This change of pattern may well become more of the norm as the war against terrorism progresses. U.S. and Coalition forces have learned that the enemy is using demining frequency from bases that are not necessarily in friendly or non-conflictive territory. As a result, and based on the experience since February 2002 in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army's doctrine on dealing with mines is likely to require revision or, at least, expansion to account for situations such as those encountered in Afghanistan.

Mine Clearance vs. Demining

In U.S. Army doctrine, there is a clear delineation of responsibility between mine clearance operations, which are conducted by the Corps of Engineers, and removal and disposal of UXO, which is the responsibility of Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams attached to or integrated with combat units. Furthermore, there is a clear distinction in doctrine between mine clearance and demining. The latter, in fact, is not acknowledged as a military mission. Army doctrine calls for breaching or clearing lines of communication through minefields, clearly demarcating the cleared borders, and moving through as quickly as operationally possible. A certain number of casualties are recognised as inevitable in such operations. Military minefields are usually laid to channel or delay movement, so that direct or indirect fire, or both, can be brought to bear on an opposing force that has slowed down or is concentrated at certain predetermined points in an attempt to arrest or avoid the minefield. As a result, Army doctrine emphasizes speed in dealing with such obstacles so as to engage and defeat the enemy directly, while reducing the exposure of units to enemy fire.

At this point, it is useful to note that Army doctrine on mine clearance continues to reflect readiness for a war of rapid movement, such as was expected in Europe and was carried out in the Gulf War. On the other hand, demining or humanitarian demining, where the goal is to render defined area mine-free, is more properly mine-safe, not recognised as a military mission in doctrine. While it is true that U.S. Special Forces personnel receive training in humanitarian demining at Fort Leonard Wood, they do so in order to teach it to foreign military personnel. In combat, Special Forces do not have demining or humanitarian demining as a mission and they do not, indeed, have mine clearance as a mission either.

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References

Most information for this article is from interviews with Mr. David Howard, Mr. Danan Gerow, Mr. Stephen Bryant and Mr. Paul Simmons in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, February 2003. I thank them for their cooperation and hospitality. Any errors, misinformation or mischaracterization in this article is my fault alone.

All photos courtesy of MCI.
Operation Enduring Freedom

The occupation of Bagram and Kandahar airfields in Afghanistan, and their steady upgrade into semi-permanent operational bases for U.S. and Coalition forces has highlighted this doctrinal issue. Sadly, it has done so in the context of several casualties early in the occupation: at the same time, it has also highlighted for the U.S. Army the need, if not to rethink and redefine doctrine, then to account for situations in which demining (as opposed to mine clearance) is required to ensure operational safety and even troop habitability.

In their initial occupation of these bases, the Marine Expeditionary Force discovered wide areas that were infested with mines and UXO. Addressing these threats was hampered by the limited availability of mine detectors and equipment. As a result, much of the early "demining" was accomplished by deploying troops in a line-abustive, using their bayonets to prod the ground in search of mines and UXO. Latently, this led to several casualties and fatalities, either as a result of accidents while conducting such operations or by unimpressively being declared a "clear" following such operations.

An early response to this situation was the introduction of Jordanian Army Aardvark flails and, shortly thereafter, Norwegian-provided Hydraema flails. Both have since been used extensively in processing land within the perimeters of Bagram and Kandahar. The U.S. and Coalition forces, however, were soon exposed to the reality of flail operations:

- while they can "process" land (and are especially useful in areas where vegetation must be removed or minimized) and detonate mines, they are also prone to leaving significant numbers of UXO, and some mines, in their wake.

Since the land processed by the flails was still dangerous and unfit for habitation or other operations, ARCENT contracted with RONCO Consulting Corporation to provide eight mine detection dog (MDD) teams. Four were assigned to Bagram and four to Kandahar, for what was planned to be an initial six-month period, beginning in early February 2002.

The MDD teams deployed by the RONCO consisted of highly experienced dogs and their Bowman handlers; most had been working together between four and five years and had previously worked in widely varying areas, including Bosnia, Azerbajan, Kosovo, Namibia and Gautamn South East. The experience and success of these teams is reflected in the fact that one of them—Jariatim Josephovic and Benda—was selected by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the Marshall Legacy Institute to receive a "Champions of Children" award in 2002, along with other luminaries such as Queen Noor of Jordan and Senators Chuck Hagel and Patrick Leahy.

Contrary to popular misconception, a six-week work day, soon became evident that, in order to provide quality assurance at a pace commensurate with that of the flails and of the expansion needs of the military, a seven-day work week was necessary. As a result, after almost six months of operations, the eight teams had provided quality assurance to more than 1.1 million square meters of land and in the process had discovered more than 6,000 mines and UXO, which were either collected for demolition or blown in place, as circumstances dictated.

While these efforts have been admirable, there are certain areas that, in fact, attracted the most attention from within the force.