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Military-NGO Partnerships: Lessons Learned for the 8th Theater Sustainment Command's HMA Mission in Vietnam

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A Staff Sergeant from the 74th ORD CO instructs trainees for the Vietnam Mine Action Center on explosives and explosive effects during phase one of humanitarian mine action training in August 2016. Interpreters were provided by Golden West Humanitarian Foundation and were instrumental to our success.

All photos courtesy of 74th ORD CO.

In August 2016, U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) and medical personnel executed the first phase of a four-year mission in support of Vietnam. The goal of this mission is to develop indigenous, International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) Level 3 certified instructors for the recently established Vietnam National Mine Action Center (VNMAC). USARPAC partnered with Golden West Humanitarian Foundation, an NGO that runs mine action operations around the world. Golden West provided insight and recommendations on equipment purchases, curriculum development, and other aspects of program development as it related to EOD tasks. As USARPAC looks toward the future, its partnerships with NGOs should continue to be an integral component to the mission of developing indigenous VNMAC instructors and the overall VNMAC capabilities and competencies.

In 2013, Vietnam and the United States reached a mutual agreement for the removal of explosive remnants of war (ERW) and further development of Vietnamese mine action capabilities. The 2013 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) builds upon previous cooperation between the United States and Vietnam and aims “to establish a long-term framework for strengthening humanitarian cooperation between Vietnam and the US of overcoming consequences of explosive remnants of war in Viet Nam.” As a result, USARPAC was tasked by U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) to provide military trainers to assist the Vietnamese People’s Army (VPA) in developing IMAS certified instructors to become cadre at VNMAC. These certified instructors will teach new classes of deminers and EOD technicians to increase Vietnam’s abilities to protect their citizens from ERW. The 8th Theater Sustainment Command (TSC) was subsequently tasked with this mission,

to include providing personnel and overall resource coordination for the mission. The 74th Ordnance Company (74th ORD CO) was selected to provide the EOD trainers, while the Regional Health Command – Pacific provided medical subject matter experts for emergency trauma training. Upon receipt of this mission, Golden West was contacted for their assistance and insight on EOD training. In addition to helping with pre-mission planning, Golden West provided one EOD trainer and two interpreters who were instrumental in the success of the mission. Unfortunately, USARPAC does not currently partner with any NGOs specializing in emergency medical trauma (EMT) training and mine risk education (MRE).

There are numerous benefits to establishing an effective humanitarian mine action (HMA) military-NGO partnership in Vietnam. For the 8th TSC, NGOs like Golden West provide years of experience and cultural understanding that cannot be rapidly developed, and their presence will remain relatively constant while the personnel within the command is ever changing. Additionally, Golden West is able to monitor and mentor Vietnamese army personnel who have recently completed IMAS Level 1 training in order to ensure they retain the lessons learned and to prepare them for future training from the 74th ORD CO. This continuity function will be key to USARPAC's success due to the fact that USARPAC cannot maintain a quasi-permanent presence in Vietnam.

NGOs benefit from this relationship in several ways. First, collaboration with 8th TSC personnel allows the United States to advocate for NGOs and assist with any potential issues. For example, Golden West has struggled to attain suitable bulk explosives (i.e., TNT) for disposal operations. During a tour of VNMAC and subsequent meetings, the 8th TSC and Golden West personnel were able to communicate directly with senior VNMAC leadership to ensure they understood the issues at hand and that they would need to fix their explosive supply issues. Another potential benefit for NGOs is that when 8th TSC personnel use the NGOs' best practices, it becomes inculcated into the future VNMAC instructors. This will provide VNMAC with personnel who know Golden West techniques. With this relationship, the host nation deminers and NGO personnel will be able to more effectively collaborate and cooperate in clearing ERW. Finally, country-specific collaboration builds the relationship and trust required for operations elsewhere in the region. For example, Golden West provided the Department of States' (DOS) Quick Reaction Force for ERW assessment following a request for U.S. Government support (i.e., Tuvalu following Cyclone Pam). Our current partnership with Golden West provides a solid foundation for future humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations

in which USARPAC EOD personnel may be working alongside and in collaboration with Golden West.

Vietnam benefits from a comprehensive, well-coordinated program that incorporates a myriad of military and NGO/civilian expertise that no one organization can provide. At the conclusion of this mission, the Vietnamese will have fifteen trained personnel to instruct future deminers at their new mine action center. The increased cadre of trained personnel will in turn increase Vietnam's ability to keep its citizens safe from landmines and ERW.

The most recent iteration of our partnership with Golden West—a two week mentorship session in Quang Tri Province—integrated VNMAC students with two teams that had already been trained through IMAS Level 2 by Golden West. VNMAC personnel trained in the field to learn how to conduct battle area clearance (BAC) and live unexploded ordnance (UXO) disposal from their Golden West-trained counterparts. Two soldiers from the 74th ORD CO participated in this training. Observing this live training with the Vietnamese allowed our soldiers to impart their knowledge directly into the Vietnamese standard operating procedures. It also gave our soldiers insight into exactly where we need to amend our curriculum so that VNMAC trainers can mesh directly into future operations with their countrymen and Golden West. Soldiers of the 74th continued into a Golden West-taught IMAS Level 1 course to better understand how to properly teach the course material. Although this step should have taken place before our initial IMAS Level 1 course in August 2016, it provided invaluable insight for future iterations.




A Vietnam People's Army soldier conducts mine detector practical training with their new training equipment provided by the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense during phase one of humanitarian mine action training in August 2016. Golden West Humanitarian Foundation was a key advisor on equipment purchases.

There are numerous challenges to establishing an effective military-NGO partnership. The immediate lesson learned by 8th TSC was the need for early and frequent communication between all parties at all levels of command. On the ground, Golden West personnel did not fully understand USARPAC's mission and desired goals. This is attributable to both poor communication practices and our own lack of exact objectives. Email is a sufficient means of exchanging information, but it is a poor substitute for verbal communication. More face-to-face contact was required throughout the planning process, to include 8th TSC attendance in similar classes conducted by NGOs. Second, there are a number of contractual and funding challenges associated with Department of Defense (DoD) regulations that place strict limitations on DoD funds being used to pay NGOs. While the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) has significantly more latitude to fund NGOs, there are still challenges and limitations on maintaining long-term continuity in the selected NGO vendor. Finally—while not the case in this instance—there can be a reluctance for NGOs to be seen actively engaged and coordinating with military forces. This latter concern may be more applicable to post-war conflicts, but it must be recognized and is best dealt with prior to crisis situations and resolved on a case-by-case basis.

The lack of effective civil-military partnerships, including NGO-military partnerships, was cited by James Stephenson (former USAID director for post-war reconstruction in Iraq) as a key contributing factor to the numerous failures in post-war Iraq. Collectively, the triad of partnerships between NGOs, the U.S. military, and the Vietnamese military will develop inter-organizational and international trust. This will allow the triad to effectively operate together anywhere in the world should we be called upon to work together to mitigate or respond to natural or man-made disasters or post-military conflict. Within Vietnam, the benefits are immediate and tangible with the creation of VNMAC and the certification of its trainers. While there are no current NGO partnerships with USARPAC for MRE and EMT care, the DoS has funded NGO efforts within these areas in Vietnam. Development of NGO partnerships within these two pillars of HMA will assist in developing a comprehensive mine action program that implements all three components of HMA. Coordination through USPACOM with DoS and Vietnamese authorities will make these partnerships possible and effective.

Through USPACOM and in coordination with DoS and Vietnamese Peoples' Army, the 8th TSC must continue to

build effective NGO partnerships in Vietnam in order to maximize the potential of VNMAC as quickly as possible. In addition to selecting a long-term EOD partner, the DoD—in partnership with DoS—would be well-served to select NGO partners for EMT training and MRE in order to achieve the same potential benefits as the EOD partnership with Golden West. Once selected, the 8th TSC and subordinate units need to establish early and effective communication with our NGO partners and VNMAC in order to ensure long-term mission success. The most important benefits will accrue to the Vietnamese people, who will see their country free of landmines and ERW that threaten their livelihoods and the well-being of their children. Vietnam gains a credible military capability that can be utilized throughout their homeland and the world in support of United Nations Peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and other military operations. The United States also gains a trusted, credible partner capable of meeting mutually beneficial national objectives. 

The views expressed by the authors' are their own and may not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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