

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

---

Volume 16  
Issue 2 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 3

---

July 2012

## How DTRA/SCC-WMD is Minimizing the Risk of Catastrophic Accidents

Anne Marek  
*DTRA/SCC-WMD*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>



Part of the [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Marek, Anne (2012) "How DTRA/SCC-WMD is Minimizing the Risk of Catastrophic Accidents," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol16/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

# How DTRA/SCC-WMD is Minimizing the Risk of Catastrophic Accidents Across the Globe

The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the U.S. Strategic Command Center for Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction are taking measures to reduce the number of accidents caused by conventional weapons. More accidents are occurring with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons; DTRA wants to significantly reduce those accidents and the risks of their occurrence. In doing so, DTRA's SA/LW Program organizes and conducts seminars on the practices for physical security and stockpile management throughout the world. Its goal is to educate countries through seminars on proper management of stockpiles and to ultimately assuage the risk of those weapons becoming available to insurgents.

by Anne Marek [ DTRA/SCC-WMD ]

On 6 April 1994, two man-portable air-defense missiles, or MANPADS, struck an aircraft in mid-air carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, causing the plane to erupt into flames and crash into the gardens of the Rwandan presidential palace. The crash killed both presidents and propelled one of the bloodiest conflicts of the late 20th century, including a Rwandan genocide that killed more than 800,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Responsibility for the attack remains disputed, but the method—MANPADS, commonly referred to as shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles—demonstrates the tragic and destabilizing consequences that can occur when conventional weapons and munitions fall into dangerous hands.

During the Cold War (1945–1991), millions of small arms and light weapons—pistols, machine guns, shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles and rocket-propelled grenades—were manufactured and shipped around the world. Since then, many of these weapons have fueled local and international armed conflicts and supplied low-level terrorists and non-state actors with the ability to cause widespread casualties and economic disaster.

The United Nations estimates that conventional firearms kill more than 500,000 people worldwide every year,<sup>2</sup> with the bulk of these deaths occurring in conflict zones of developing

regions. MANPADS have hit at least 40 civilian aircraft since the 1970s, and these weapons continue to pose a threat to commercial aviation.

## DTRA's SA/LW Program

The Defense Threat Reduction Agency's SA/LW Program plays a critical role in reducing SA/LW across the globe. The branch assists foreign governments with improving security, safety and management of state-controlled stockpiles of SA/LW, MANPADS and conventional ammunition. SA/LW experts provide foreign governments with assessments, technical advice and orientation seminars on the best international practices for physical security and stockpile management. By securing and managing these stockpiles, the DTRA's SA/LW Program limits the availability of weapons and ammunition to terrorists and insurgents.

DTRA helps reduce regional exposure to destabilizing cross-border weapons transfers and minimizes the risk around the world of catastrophic accidents caused by improperly storing weapons.

"The whole world is affected by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. If it's not a concern for tracking and tracing, it's a concern for import and export control, or it's a concern for illegal trafficking," says SA/LW Branch Chief

*"Nobody has been killed by a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb in 50 years, but people get killed by small arms and light weapons on a daily basis. These weapons are much easier to acquire, conceal and transport. They are the everyday tool of a terrorist."*

~ Brett Wise, SA/LW Internal Relations Specialist and SOUTHCOM/PACOM Desk Office



Senior Technical Officer, Bill Johnson, assesses an ammunition storage area in Southeast Asia, Fall 2010. All graphics courtesy of Defense Threat Reduction Agency/USSTRATCOM Center for Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction [DTRA/SCC-WMD].

Larry Schultz. "The channels used to smuggle drugs and other illegal substances are the same channels used to smuggle weapons and ammunition."<sup>3</sup>

DTRA's on-site Inspection Directorate first became involved in PSSM, following a deadly ammunition explosion in Guyana in 2000. Prior to this accident, the agency's focus centered primarily on arms-control treaties and activities in the former Soviet Union. However, after the Guyana event, DTRA, with its experience in conducting military missions in sensitive environments, was asked to provide technical expertise to the U.S. Department of State to help foreign nations safely secure and store stockpiles of arms, munitions and explosives.

Over the next few years, DTRA developed and conducted orientation seminars to assist nations with securing national SA/LW and ammunition stores. In 2006, DTRA was designated the executive agent for supporting SA/LW destruction initiatives, providing assistance to countries wishing to improve the security of their stockpiles of small arms and ammunition. Since then, the agency's SA/LW expertise has continued to grow significantly as the types and number of missions have developed and evolved.

## DTRA's SA/LW Outreach

Currently, program requests come from a number of sources: U.S. Embassies, U.S. regional combatant commands (European Command, Central Command, Northern Command, Africa Command, Southern Command and Pacific Command), the U.S. Department of State, host nations and multilateral organizations. For each request, DTRA conducts a thorough, routine coordination process that seeks concurrence from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, appropriate staff offices and the partner country's U.S. Embassy. Through additional coordination with the United Nations, NATO, the Multinational Small Arms and Ammunition Group, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other nations' arms-control and

### Steps in a Small Arms and Light Weapons Request

1. SA/LW experts meet with host government.
2. Host government requests assistance.
3. SA/LW team performs assessment of host government's munitions, weapons, storage and safety.
4. Assessment results are reported to the local U.S. Embassy.
5. The local U.S. Embassy reports assessment findings to the host government.
6. SA/LW team reports results to U.S. Department of State for funding consideration.
7. SA/LW team shares best practices with host government to correct problems.
8. Host government may implement best practices with or without funding or U.S. assistance.

SA/LW by the Numbers		
	Total Assessed (Since 2001)	Total Destroyed (Since 2001)
Total MANPADS	26,607	32,000
Total SA/LW	1,657,500	1,500,000
Total Ammunition (Tons)	2,686,296	90,000

Table 1. Destruction activities funded and administered by the U.S. Department of State.

verification agencies, the program has mediated many U.S. bilateral and multilateral commitments.

In less than a decade, DTRA has conducted PSSM assessment missions and seminars in 60 countries worldwide. DTRA-recommended solutions, ranging from the destruction of conventional weapons to the building of more secure SA/LW storage facilities, may receive funding from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA).

"We've done assessments everywhere you can imagine," says SA/LW Internal Relations Specialist and Southern Command/Pacific Command Desk Officer Brett Wise. "Sometimes we have to remind people that just because a place is nice to visit doesn't mean it doesn't have problems."<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 2010, fishermen in the Galapagos Islands retrieved nine severely corroded World War II-era bombs left over from an abandoned military airbase in 1947. A Navy-led investigation revealed that local fishermen have occasionally pulled up and released aircraft bombs from territorial waters, and a large number of these bombs remain on the seafloor. In addition, a small quantity of aging ammunition was found near the abandoned U.S. military base. Concerned about the potential threat to its tourist industry, the Ecuadorian Government requested U.S. assistance to address the problem. DTRA conducted a subsequent threat

assessment, identified all the risks and made recommendations on how Ecuador could best consolidate and destroy the aging munitions.

"That base was built at a time when those islands were considered by some, to be a worthless wasteland," says SA/LW Program Manager Billy Johnson. "It wasn't until years later, when Ecuador realized the ecological importance of the area, that they began protecting it. Those islands are now a major source of tourism for Ecuador. So an accident there could have seriously affected their income stream."<sup>5</sup>

The SA/LW Program may seem like an unusual fit for an agency focused on countering weapons of mass

destruction—chemical, radiological, biological, nuclear and high-yield explosives—but its mission is shared. High-yield explosives, technically classified as SA/LW, are one of the most easily acquired forms of CBRNE materials and, depending on the amount and location of the explosives, can prove as deadly as their chemical, biological or nuclear counterparts.

Additionally, the cooperative relationships that DTRA built through the SA/LW Program demonstrate that the agency can help partner countries control and reduce weapons within their own borders while providing assistance and training as it relates to weapons of mass destruction.



SA/LW Technical Advisor Ben Cacioppo assesses an ammunition storage site in Central America, summer 2010.



African weapons storage facility, summer 2010.

In November 2010, DTRA U.S. Strategic Command Center for Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction Director Kenneth Myers joined U.S. Senator Richard (Dick) Lugar (R-Indiana), Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Defense Programs Andrew C. Weber, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Global Strategic Affairs Ken Handelmann, in leading a mission to Burundi where experts from the Departments of State and Defense are working closely with the Burundi Government to destroy weapons and ammunition stockpiles through the Lugar-Obama SA/LW Destruction Program. The program is a by-product of the Nunn-Lugar Global Cooperative Threat Reduction effort that has succeeded in securing, storing and eliminating weapons of mass destruction for more than two decades. "Whether we're dealing with conventional weapons or dirty

bombs, physical security and stockpile management is a large part of what this agency does," says SA/LW Deputy Branch Chief and European Command/Central Command Desk Officer John Schmitt. "Stockpile management of explosives

can help prevent catastrophic events like Khobar Towers and the Oklahoma City bombing..."<sup>6,7</sup>

The program's success is not without its challenges. Three of the program's desk officers break down the six geographic combatant commands. Together, with a staff of 11, they must brief every defense attaché and every security officer that enters host countries. Program desk officers must prepare personnel for what to expect when they arrive and educate them on how the SA/LW Program can assist their country with physical security and stockpile management. They must gain the trust and respect of the host country to allow them to enter the country and assess the host's weapons and munitions.

"We can't just come in and say, 'We want to look at all your stockpiles and possibly destroy some of them,' because they don't always understand why," says

Wise.<sup>4</sup> "So we go into their country in a cooperative manner and tell them that we know they are the true experts of what they need for their own defense purposes. We explain that we just want to make sure that whatever they have is being secured properly, but that's not always easy to do."

In 2008, DTRA approached Tanzania through the U.S. Embassy to offer an assessment of the facility in the Mbagala district of Tanzania, which had long been identified as a concern. However, Tanzania did not take advantage of the opportunity. The following year, an ammunition explosion at the facility killed 26 people, injured hundreds more and destroyed more than 7,000 homes.

DTRA offered to help the country secure its facilities, but Tanzania again declined. Two years later, an army munitions bunker housing aging ammunition exploded in Mbagala near the international airport. The explosion killed at least 20 people and wounded more than 100.<sup>8</sup>

"Unfortunately, this happens," says SA/LW Africa Command Desk Officer Chanda Brown. "We offer our assistance to countries, and they don't take it. They have so many other factors

*"The [U.S.] State Department was given the mandate to finance destruction of these weapons for the U.S., but they did not have the necessary technical expertise to do it. DTRA became the technical set of eyes to help the State Department carry out that mission."*

~ Larry Schultz, SA/LW Branch Chief



SA/LW Technical Advisor Ben Cacioppo escorts U.S. Senator Richard Lugar and U.S. officials at a storage facility in Burundi, Fall 2010.

for instability—coups, changes in leadership and natural disasters—that they don’t always see us as a priority. But when they do agree to schedule a meeting with us, and they don’t cancel... when they listen to what we can do for them and seem to want to make a difference... when they actually work to make

tangible improvements themselves or follow up with the State Department for assistance... that’s what I view as a success.”<sup>9</sup>

In March 2011, a SA/LW team deployed to the Democratic Republic of the Congo was preparing to conduct a seminar at a base attached to the DRC presidential palace when 60 armed

rebels stormed the compound in a violent attempt to assassinate President Joseph Kabila of the DRC. In a hail of gunfire, numerous soldiers and rebels were killed; the compound was closed

*“We help prevent humanitarian disasters, and we do it on a relatively small budget. We would prefer to spend a couple thousand taxpayer dollars upfront over millions of dollars worth of humanitarian aid following a disaster.”*

~ Ben Cacioppo, SA/LW Technical Advisor

for investigation, and the SA/LW team was forced to relocate the seminar. “We were teaching our seminar to the participants from the base that was attacked,” says SA/LW Africa Command Technical Advisor Ben Cacioppo. “With everything that had just happened, it was difficult to get their mindset back onto some of the things we were talking about ... but we talked about the tragedy and what could have prevented it to re-focus them on why we were there.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the global effort to secure SA/LW has increased, the threat posed by these weapons persists. Large ammunition stockpiles accumulated during the Cold War continue deteriorating around the world, and many countries, especially those without strong diplomatic ties to the United States, do not request assistance until an accident occurs. “One of the most difficult things about this program is that we can’t do an assessment until they invite us in,” says Brown. “When they do invite us in, we prefer to do our assessments first, but when that is not possible, we can use our seminars as a lead into the assessments. That way, we are informing countries that aren’t familiar with us, and don’t know why we’re there or what we’re really after, before we do the assessment. Basically, we’re trying to earn their trust and build relationships where we can.”<sup>9</sup>

In coordination with multilateral organizations and the arms control and verification agencies of like-minded nations, the SA/LW Program assists nations with stockpile management and building lasting relations with the countries where it conduct missions. “It’s an education process worldwide,” says Schmitt. “It is free

for these countries for us to come in (and that’s what we try to sell them on), listen to what we have to say and if there’s a problem, we tell them how to fix it. For the most part, the solutions we offer don’t break the bank, but if you think about how much human suffering and economic turmoil that an accident in one of these places may create, our program is a real value.”<sup>6</sup>

See endnotes page 81

~ Reprinted with permission from *The Shield, Volume 1, Issue 3, Fall 2011*



Anne Marek is a professional writer and media consultant specializing in strategic public relations, marketing and governmental affairs. She has served as the Public and Media Relations Director of two national nonprofit organizations and developed multinational media campaigns on behalf of federal, nonprofit and private organizations. Marek has authored national print and online publications focusing on topics related to defense, national security and the environment. She is Senior Editor of *The Shield*, the official magazine of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

.....  
Anne Marek  
Tel: +1 202 321 5440  
Email: anne.marek@gmail.com