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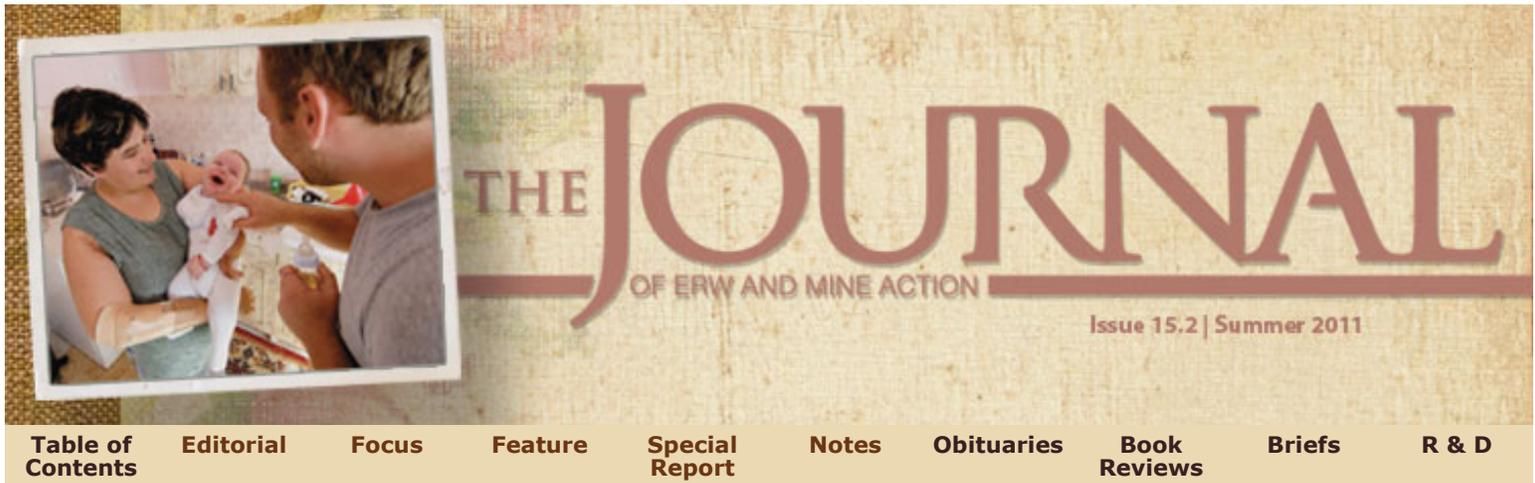
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Tucker's Story: DCA's Trustworthy Man in the Field

by Tamar Szeps-Znaider [DanChurchAid]

This article offers a brief glimpse into the path of an Angolan deminer who, over the years, has developed into a known figure within the international mine action community. Quickly rising through positions of responsibility, Tucker demonstrates qualities of leadership, and his success is a testament to his work ethic and dedication.

Francisco Gonçalves Tucker Kapinãla, better known as "Tucker," is a trusted and respected employee of DanChurchAid's mine-action program in Angola. Through hard work and perseverance, he has successfully advanced through the ranks of DCA.

Beginning his career as a deminer, Tucker was promoted to Supervisor and Technical Advisor and has recently traveled to other DCA programs to teach and share knowledge with DCA national staff. Soon he also is expected to be accepted in DCA international/expatriate postings out of Angola.

Joining DCA

Having acquired demining and special engineering skills as a member of one of the former liberation movements during Angola's civil war, Tucker applied to participate in a DCA demining course in 2004, and was quickly accepted and employed as a DCA deminer. At that time, DCA was in the early phases of developing its Angola program, which today continues clearing the heavily contaminated Moxico province from landmines and explosive remnants of war.

Tucker describes his early experiences: "Mines were known to be a massive threat to my fellow nationals and, since I had been trained in the army, I felt that this job was suitable in terms of my army training as well as in terms of my strong feelings regarding the persistent danger of mines in my country. ... At that time we did not know the extent of the landmine problem. Even today we are not sure of the exact size of the problem—only that it remains so large that it's still very difficult to measure accurately."

Moving Up

While Tucker started as a deminer in DCA, he quickly rose in the ranks and was promoted to Section Commander. Recognizing his strong leadership potential and outstanding service to the organization, DCA offered him a number of opportunities for furthering his education. In May 2005, he participated in a section leadership course led by DCA expatriates. Later that same year, he was selected to attend an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Level 2 course. Tucker passed both courses and was promoted to the permanent position of Manual Demining Supervisor. Two years later he was invited to attend an EOD Level 3 training course in Denmark, and in June 2008 Tucker was awarded the EOD Level 3 certification.



EOD Level 3 training at Skive: Angola Operations Manager Fatmire UKA (far left), Tucker (second from the right).
All photos courtesy of the author.

Since obtaining this certificate, Tucker has engaged in numerous clearance tasks that have released land back to the destitute population in the Moxico province. However, his supervisory role has also brought along significant responsibilities. One such responsibility became painfully apparent when an accident occurred under his supervision.

Tucker remembers the events leading up to the accident: "In early June [2009], I was assigned to two minefields in Chicololo, an area located 176 kilometers [109 miles] south of Moxico's capital, Luena. The area had not been considered a threat until the village expanded with the arrival of IDPs [internally displaced persons] and a growing population, and then inhabitants started to have accidents. Mines were found just outside the doors of people's houses when DCA started surveying the land."

A couple of months later, the accident happened. A deminer had found a detonating cord (cordex), followed protocol and called for help. When Tucker arrived on the scene, he concluded that it was a booby trap. As part of the relevant drills, he neutralized the system by cutting the detonating cord that was connected to two anti-tank mines and then told the deminer to follow the detonating cord in order to identify the fuze type. In the act of following the instructions, the deminer initiated the fuze and subsequently lost his hand in the explosion.

"It is very difficult to explain to anyone the emotional turmoil of having an accident happen under your supervision," says Tucker. "We torture ourselves with questions like, 'Did we do it right?' 'Could it have been prevented?' 'Am I to blame?' 'What if he had died?' and 'What is his future now?' These questions are endless and very troubling to everyone involved." While the accident's investigation concluded that procedures were followed correctly, Tucker notes, "It still doesn't make the memory any easier."



Tucker at Tchicololo showing the close proximity of mines to the village being cleared.

Going International

In 2010, DCA invited Tucker to travel to Lebanon to gain further experience in the field of international operations. During his time in Lebanon, Tucker was not only exposed to expatriate living, but he also participated in training new Lebanese deminers.

Although Tucker returned to Angola, he was soon invited back to take part in a more detailed training program as an international trainee. "It seems that my career as an expatriate EOD-3 Technical Advisor is about to take off and the hardships of Angolan life, the efforts of study, loyalty and being dedicated to my work is paying off," Tucker notes with a smile. ↴

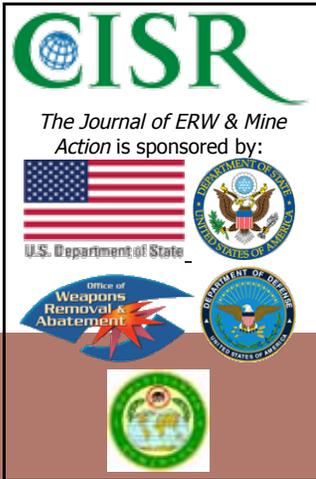
Biography

Tamar Szeps-Znaider has worked with DanChurchAid's Mine Action Unit since August 2009. Before her employment with DCA she has worked both in the nonprofit and private sectors in Washington, D.C. Szeps-Znaider has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from the University of Copenhagen (Denmark) and Master of Arts in International Affairs (Middle East concentration) from the George Washington University (U.S.).



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