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RONCO’s Response to Explosive Remnants of War in Post-conflict Environments

RONCO’s technical experts are dedicated to eliminating threats created by landmines and explosive remnants of war. Part of RONCO’s disposal process is creating local demining capacities in their host countries. As part of a quick response, RONCO has most recently added mine-action programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, creating a specialized explosive-ordnance-disposal capacity in Afghanistan and establishing a bomb-disposal training school in Iraq.

by Stacy L. Smith [RONCO Consulting Corporation]

Their eyes widen and a smile appears at the first sight of a previously stacked pile of munitions, newly uncovered bunker of mines or slyly matched pair of explosive devices. They pose for pictures beside rockets in Iraq and caches in Afghanistan. Back at RONCO headquarters in Washington, D.C., it’s pretty obvious that these guys—our highly trained technical experts in explosive ordnance disposal—can hardly wait to blow something up.

On second glance, though, something more is apparent: It’s not just love for the job, nor a love for the detonation cord, placing the charges and watching the big explosions. It is about the pride and satisfaction that RONCO’s EOD Advisers take in eliminating the threats created by mines and other explosive remnants of war and in transferring their skills to host-nation personnel so future disposal operations can continue unabated once they’ve departed. Through formal classroom instruction, on-the-job training and mentoring in the disposal of vasted and numerous munitions, RONCO has ensured a swift and safe response to the ERW threat, most recently as an added component to its humanitarian mine-action programs in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Background

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, RONCO was on the ground within weeks of the cessation of the initial conflicts. In 2001, RONCO sent 14 Technical Advisors to Afghanistan to aid the U.N. Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan in upgrading its clearance efforts, and in 2005, the U.S. Department of State’s Quick Reaction Demining Force was deployed in Baghdad to respond to emergency clearance tasks. This led to follow-on requests to develop a national mine-action capacity in Iraq. In both of these situations, RONCO was asked to deploy quickly, foster a national capacity for humanitarian demining and create a capacity for independent EOD operations, with all activities initially funded under the U.S. DOS’s Integrated Mine Action Support contract.

Historically, RONCO has always disposed of ERW encountered during humanitarian-demining operations. In recent years, however, the importance of developing a local capacity to conduct this work has become more critical as RONCO has increasingly undertaken projects in hostile and fragile post-conflict environments.

RONCO’s approach always involves the training of a local national capacity to perform this work, not only because of its extensive knowledge of the location and type of ordnance found, but because of its desire, like that of RONCO’s own field staff, to benefit the communities in which it works. The following accounts of RONCO’s approach to building highly specialized disposal teams in Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate the company’s success in integrating these capacities into mine-action programs while operating in unstable environments.

Creating a Specialized EOD Capacity in Afghanistan

In 2001, Coalition bombing throughout Afghanistan left former Taliban and Afghan Army bases destroyed. Left unaccounted, these bases and ammunition supply points attracted insurgents gathering munitions for improvised explosive devices and locals collecting scrap metal.

With an increasing number of attacks on Coalition Forces and accidents at the ASPs, their clearance quickly became a priority for local authorities. Following discussions with the U.N. Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan, the U.S. Department of State agreed to form specialized EOD teams operating outside of the normal U.N. structure to address the problem. Under the Department of State’s Integrated Mine Action Support contract, RONCO trained five 12-man, specialized EOD teams comprised of local Afghans to operate in Kandahar, Herat, Khowst and Mazari-Sharif, as well as other sensitive regions of Afghanistan. In addition, RONCO trained four other EOD teams operating under the Demining Agency for Afghanistan, an independent non-governmental organization whose creation was in the early 1990s RONCO supported, to focus on clearance of villages in the heavily fought-over southern region of Afghanistan.

RONCO coordinated with local government and other government officials to identify munitions stockpiles creating threats to the population and also to determine land-use requirements and national priorities. The teams then assessed the type of ordnance, level and type of damage, and security threat posed by the ordnance. RONCO also liaised with Provincial Rehabilitation Trams and Coalition units in the area, who often requested assistance in destroying caches of munitions, deeply buried bombs and other unexploded ordnance, and other weapons hindering their operations.

RONCO’s EOD teams first conducted initial surface clearance to recover and destroy ordnance around the perimeter of the bunkers or caches. The teams then breached the damaged bunkers manually or with the aid of mechanical equipment, clearing collapsed walls and debris so the contents of the bunker could be inspected and sorted. Items identified by Coalition Forces as a threat or classified too dangerous to transport were immediately destroyed. After the RONCO EOD teams emptied each bunker, mechanical equipment was again used to sift through any rubble to locate and remove any remaining UXO.

Due to the security situation in Afghanistan, RONCO trained and employed static guards at its work sites to safeguard personnel and equipment. On duty around the clock, the guards governed insurgent groups or scrap-metal collectors from stealing munitions. These security elements protected the local population by reducing the threat of improvised explosive devices in their communities and decreasing ordnance-related incidents among scrap collectors, many of whom are children, gathering and selling the metal.

The creation of this specialized EOD capacity in Afghanistan produced impressive results in three years of operations. During the first few weeks of operations in 2003, the teams destroyed over 45,000 107-mm rockets in Kandahar at the request of commanders at Kandahar Air Base, which was under weekly attack. After removing these weapons, the number of attacks on the base was reduced to just six in the entire following year. In total, the EOD teams destroyed over two million items of explosive ordnance, including in part 22,800 mines, 84,000 rockets, 935,000 projectiles, 100 missiles and, of particular interest, 30 man-portable air-defense systems posing a significant threat if obtained by terrorists. This total does not include the disposal of hundreds of tons of scrap metal, which is also found in bunkers or caches.

Additionally, Demining Agency for Afghanistan teams advised and monitored by RONCO cleared over two million items of explosive ordnance from over 400 villages in southern Afghanistan during this time period. These teams, which previously did not know how to dispose of large bombs, were trained by RONCO, developing a national capacity, so land could be rendered safe for local populations.

Establishing a Bomb-Disposal Training School in Iraq

In March 2005, RONCO was tasked by the Multi-National Security Transition Command, the U.S. Department of State/IMCO, to provide explosive-ordnance-disposal training and support services to develop up to four Iraqi National Guard EOD companies. For this purpose, RONCO tapped its instructional cadre from the Iraqi Mine/UXO Clearance Organization, which was created and trained by RONCO between 2003 and 2004.

After the initial mobilization of RONCO and IMCO personnel, along with the renovation of living and classroom facilities at a compound in southern Iraq, planning and coordination for the first course commenced. The RONCO/IMCO staff developed and implemented training programs, programs of instruction,
The force at its training facility in Iraq to provide bomb disposal with basic trauma life support. Of the 301 Iraqi soldiers trained, 242 were trained to EOD Level I and 59 were trained to EOD Levels II and III. RONCO also developed a database of the students’ qualifications for use in maintaining records of student development and to assist in identifying students for subsequent, more advanced training requirements. RONCO augmented its existing training facilities and staff in December 2005 following winning a new contract to provide EOD, improvised-explosive-device disposal and instruction training to the Iraqi Army and Police to further respond to threats posed by bombs and IEDs throughout Iraq.

Technical advice from RONCO personnel, the IMCO instructor cadre continue to conduct these training courses. In 2006, RONCO expects to train approximately 185 IED Disposal Specialists to locate, identify, dispose of and report on UXO and IEDs, vehicle-born IEDs and other explosive threats persisting in Iraq; another 650 EOD Level II Operators and 30 advanced medical personnel will also be trained. Additionally, RONCO will train and monitor a 40-person Iraqi instructor cadre in EOD and IEDD to establish a viable host-nation training capability.

The Expanding Role of Mine Action
RONCO’s gritty troops are never hesitant or ill-equipped for a mission, whether it’s a task to destroy mines, empty a bunker filled to the brim with rockets or respond to an IED threat. In their careers, they have defused, dismantled and destroyed it all and effectively transferred these skills to host-nation personnel. Oftentimes, RONCO Advisors work alongside those people to mentor them every step of the way, assisting in training ordnance for on-site detonation or hoisting munitions onto a truck for transport to a central disposal site.

As evidenced in the company’s recent post-conflict experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, RONCO has created specialized EOD capacity to address specifically the EWR threat as an extension of mine action. The extremely dangerous nature of working in these fragile environments has required the deployment and use of security in mine action, an additional component to safeguard RONCO’s people while fulfilling its commitment to the host nation and a testament to its commitment to this expanding mine-action role.

Patent Sought for Explosive-eating Fungus

Robert Riggs of Texas has filed a patent for pellets of dormant fungal spores that could be mixed with explosives before being loaded into an explosive package. The dry spores remain dormant until moisture in the air travels down the wick of an unexploded package and germinates the spores.

The fungus, a white-rot variety of Phlebia radiata, then devour the explosive material inside the bomb, rendering it harmless. Should the explosive detonate, the fungus disintegrates with the material.

By allowing manufacturers to control the content of the explosive-pellet mixture, they will be able to determine how long an unexploded package will be left dangerous.