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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 ordinance-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 face of a prior seeing a previously stacked pile of munitions, newly uncovered bunker of mines or subtly 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 about taking the pins off the detonation cord, placing the charges and watching the big explosion. It is about the pride and satisfaction that RONCO’s EOD Advisors 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 unaided once they’ve departed. Through formal classroom instruction, on-the-job training and mentoring in the disposal of vast and numerous munitions, RONCO has ensured a quick 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 conflict. 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 to Baghdad in response to emergency clearance needs. 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 those 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 unguarded, 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 nongovernmental organization whose creation 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 governors and other government officials to identify munitions stockpiles creating threats to the populace 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 Teams 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 perimeters of bunkers or caches. The teams then breached the damaged bunkers manually or with the aid of medical 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 just two years, 84,000 rockets, 915,000 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 small-arms rounds, also found in bunkers or caches.

Additionally, Demining Agency for Afghanistan teams advised and monitored by RONCO cleared UXO 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–Iraq, through the Department of State’s IMAS contract, to provide explosive-ordnance-disposal training and support services to develop up to four Iraqi National Guard EOD companies. For this project, RONCO cabled 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,
In the fall of 2001, Silvija Bogdany answered a Norwegian People’s Aid advertisement for mine-clearance personnel of both sexes. After six weeks of intensive training, Bogdany became the youngest deminer in Croatia and began working in the field alongside highly experienced male deminers. In the spring of 2003, she was promoted to Team Leader. Though she only has about four years of experience, her former Project Manager, Damir Jakši, places her in the category of “highly experienced deminers.” Bogdany is now both the Technical Advisor to and Supervisor of the DCA Mine Action Program Sudan, where the trains demining staff. Capacity building is one objective of the team, and the main goal is to help Sudanese deminers become less reliant on international supervision.

Nevertheless, Bogdany likes to think of herself as “an ordinary girl.” She likes to ride her motorcycle in her spare time; her favorite movie is Forrest Gump; and her dream is to have two dogs, two horses and a large fish aquarium.

The Deminer

Poisonous snakes are some of the less ominous dangers Bogdany encounters in the field. Below the surface of the ground lies a more deadly threat: landmines. “There were situations when I was a deminer that I can thank only God for being alive and in one piece,” she says. Such an incident occurred while she was working in Slovenia. “I was in a fight with my boyfriend, very unbalanced and stupid. I know that now. I thought that my personal problems wouldn’t interfere with my work. I was wrong.”

At the end of the work period, Bogdany’s Team Leader told her that she had to finish her session before they went home. Frustrated with her boyfriend and angry with her Team Leader, she finished clearing the section of the minefield. “The next day I went over the same I cleared with a metal detector and found my footprint in the dirt that covered an AP (anti-personnel) mine.”

“That day changed my life,” says Bogdany. “I have thought about that event many times and every time the same conclusion comes to my mind: ‘Yes, I believe that God watches over me.’”

Not many deminers who have had a similar experience have gone back to work the next day. Bogdany returned to work. “I don’t know where I got the strength to do that,” she exclaimed.

She returned to work as if nothing happened, but Bogdany broke up with her boyfriend. “I couldn’t allow myself to make the same mistake again.” Her relationship with her Team Leader changed. “I tried to admit him, but now I realized that he didn’t care about his team. He cared for how many square meters we cleared.” Bogdany says that as a result of the experience, she promised herself that if she ever

Other explosive threats persisting in Iraq: another 450 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.

Ronco’s geographic specialties never hesitate or ill-equipped for a mission, whether it’s a task to destroy mines, emplace a bunker filled to the brim with rodents 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 these people to mentor them every step of the way, assisting in tracking 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 capacities 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 added 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.

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Patent Seeking 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 devours the explosive material inside the bomb, rendering it harmless. Should the explosive detonate, the fungus disintegrates with the material.

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