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Unsung Hero: Silvija Bogdany

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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 had 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 and Supervisor of the DCA Mine Action Program Sudan, where the team is 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 monocycle 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 could thank only God for being alive and in one piece,” she says. Such an incident occurred while she was working in Slavonia. “I was in a fight with my boyfriend, very unhinged 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 section before they went home. Frustrated with her boyfriend and angry with her Team Leader, she finished clearing her section of the minefield. “The next day I went over the site 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 even 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 for 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

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

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became a Team Leader, people and their safety would come first and not the daily results. Naturally, daily achievements count, and that is how Leea a Good Team Leader—managing to have high productivity but not jeopardizing safety.

The Team Leader

As a Team Leader, day-to-day work for Bogdany might involve guiding two demining machines and an eight-person demining team at the same time. She says this is not difficult if both the team and the machines are located in the same place or near one another. However, deminers must be at least 200 meters (656 feet) away from each of the machines. “My team is often on one side of the field and the machines, naturally, are all the way on the other side of the field,” she explains. “Instead, I did a lot of walking around such as lost fly, and I am dressed to full equipments.”

The work not only mentally but physically challenges Bogdany, but it also affects her emotionally. After two Cyclone detonations were killed and one was health injured, she says, “My friends try to convince me that this comes with (big) work and I know that, but somehow I am not satisfied with that. I think that Team Leaders and Supervisors are mainly responsible for the most accidents.”

She thinks a Team Leader’s most important job is taking care of his or her team and safety on the site. “It is a really big responsibility and a person must recognize the situation and not push it. You must know every person, his way of thinking and limits. It is hard to work with people, but the reward is big.” Bogdany says.

It is difficult to combine work with every landmine incident. I think that discussing it with the team is better than not talking about it at all. What we all can and have to do is learn something from these incidents and try not to bring our colleagues and ourselves into a similar situation,” she explains. “I’ve noticed that most accidents happen at the end of the working period. I think that concentration falls and everybody is nervous and not thinking right.”

On Bogdany’s one-year anniversary of being a Team Leader she said, “My biggest reward is that I can go to sleep every evening knowing that my team is okay.”

Thinking about the Future

My experiences in mine action have developed much quicker and deeper than I thought it would,” says Bogdany. “I became a Team Leader just 15 months ago. I’ve met and became friends with many people who are also involved in mine action. I have gained much confidence in myself.”

Looking to the future, she says, “If God gives me health and luck, I will be involved in mining until my pension. I just hope that everything will turn out right.”

Bogdany remembers a time when she had a meeting. Emilia, who retired from demining when she got married, “told me one thing and I think about it every day now and then. She told me that it was when she quit mining that she realized for the first time how dangerous the job is. She is more concerned for me now than she was for herself when she was a deminer. Maybe it is better for not to think about that.”

An Interview with Silvija Bogdany

Where do you see mine action in the next 10 to 20 years, and where do you see it in ten years?

One thing is certain—there will always be minesfields and mine action in the demining sector, but there will always be something on the earth. Even if we stop war, I think that in 10 to 20 years, demining will still be demining as it is now, to their work.

Since I prefer fieldwork to office work, I see myself somewhere in a Third World country working for an NGO (nongovernmental organization) as a supervisor in mine-risk education. If money and other obstacles were no object, how would you go about dealing with the world’s mine problem?

If money were no object, hypothetically speaking, we wouldn’t have a problem here in the world. I was never this problem begins because of money and material resources. Only if every work wasn’t involved—she continued. I would have worked there where every money was involved the work difficulty. I would invest more money in research and in new technologies. I would invest my own money in new, more sophisticated equipment and in work quality. I would invest more money in research and in new technologies. I would invest my own money in new, more sophisticated equipment and in work quality.

With more personnel qualified to conduct monitoring of demining organizations, landmine hazards can be reduced in the future. In some cases, the problem of pollution along the mine detection route has been reduced.

What are some improvements you think can be made in the future mining sector?

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What do you feel are areas in the demining world that can be improved?

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Quality assurance and quality control are of big importance to demining sector. With more personnel qualified to conduct monitoring of demining organizations, landmine hazards can be reduced in the future. In some cases, the problem of pollution along the mine detection route has been reduced.

The presence of landmines all over the world is one of the United Nations, governments, and other communities are trying to address. But the difficult question lies in how to find landmine-based landmines using metal detectors because the iron-containing, ferrous metals in sub-Saharan Africa trigger the detonators, so the signal sent via this method is not very useful in certain soils. One organization, APOPO, utilizes a unique approach to finding landmines. In Tanzania and Mozambique, mine-detection rats are now being used.

Rats show much promise in demining. Like mine-detecting dogs, they have a highly developed sense of smell, which makes them ideal for finding landmines. In the United States, demining teams use sniffer dogs to detect mines in the field using vapor-detection technology. Sites landmines emit a vapor that can be detected by the dogs, which are able to use their