No Wizards, Just Patient Teachers

Bart Weetjens
APOPO

Jina Kim
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, a day’s 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 another another. However, deminers must be at least 200 meters (660 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 off the other side of the field,” she explains. “Instead, I did a lot of walking around like some lost fly, and I am dressed to full equipments.”

The work not only mentally and physically challenges Bogdany, but it also affects her emotionally. After two Croatian deminers were killed and one was health injured, she says. “My friends try to convince me that this comes with this job and I know that, but somehow I am not satisfied with that answer. I think that Team Leaders and Supervisors are mainly responsible for 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 limit. It is hard to work with people, but the reward is big,” Bogdany says.

It is difficult to combine work after every demining 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 those 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 that I can go to sleep every evening knowing that my team is okay.”

Thinking about the Future

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

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

She now remembers a long talk she had with her sister. Emilia, who retired from demining when she got married. “She told me one thing and I think about it every now and then. She told me that it was when she quit demining 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 me not to think about that.”

An Interview with Silvia Bogdany

Where do you see mine action in the 10 to 20 years, and where do you fit into this vision?

One thing is certain—there will always be mines and mine action in the field, but it will continue for many years. I think that in 10 to 20 years, demining will still be demining as it is now, to their work. I would like to see more sophisticated equipment, which will help in the work. World country working for an NGO (humanitarian organization) as a supervisor in mine-risk education. “I think that the most important thing is to understand that the world’s mine problem is not solved. If money were no object, hypothetically speaking, we wouldn’t have a problem because of money and material resources. Only if money were involved, the Troy War would be started now.”

I would invest more money in research and in new innovation. The authors describe the basic idea behind this unique concept.

No Wizards, Just Patient Teachers

by Bart Weetjens [APOPO] and Jina Kim [Mine Action Information Center]

IPOPO is a Belgian-African nongovernmental organization that trains rats to be a new mine detection tool. The authors describe the basic idea behind this unique concept.

The presence of landmines all over the world is one the United Nations, governments and other world organizations are trying to address. But the difficult question lies in how to find metal-based landmines using metal detectors because the iron-containing, ferrous metals in sub-Saharan Africa trigger the detector indiscriminately. Since many signal his hit-checked, this method is not very useful in certain soils. One organization, APOPO, reduces a unique approach to finding landmines. In Tanzania and Mynambo, mine-detection rats are now being used.

Rats show much promise in future mine detection. Like mine-detecting dogs, they have a highly developed sense of smell. APOPO trains its rats to detect mines in the field using the “vapour detection technique.” Since landmines emit a vapour from the explosives within them, the rats are able to use their

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been some of smell to detect the mines, but it is not as simple as it sounds. It depends on a lot of climatic factors as well.

APOPO was founded in 1997 and has since discovered African giant pouched rats can detect explosive samples. It was found that non-explosive rats could also find hidden samples of TNT buried in sand. However, it was not until 2008 that MDRs were used in a real minefield.

Alfredo Adamo, who eventually works for APOPO as an MDR trainer, says, “When I started working for APOPO, I only saw fully trained animals... that had been trained in Tanzania. In the first few months, MDRs were brought into any real minefield, and we were all quite excited and nervous. We worked with 18 MDR teams, all tested and accredited.” Adamo has been working with APOPO and its MDR program for three years. On average, Adamo works with 12 rats daily.

Originally from Limpopo, Mozambique, Adamo has progressed from working with fully trained rats to learning to train baby rats himself. APOPO recently assisted Adamo to learn how to train baby rats in Tanzania. He says that during the three months he will be in Tanzania, he will be taught “to train two babies from ‘fetter’ training up to a level where they can walk on a leash in the open, searching independently for training targets in a sandbox...” This training provides me with sufficient skills on how to handle the whole training process, and to teach others how to train rats.” According to Adamo, the purpose of the Tanzania training course is “to learn the diseases of rat training. This idea is a go ahead to an independent Mozambican MDR capacity. To reach this goal, APOPO gave us the opportunity to learn all the aspects of an MDR program, especially the preparatory training stages, which we lacked so far in Mozambique.”

Rats are easy to train and tame, which is useful in detecting mines quickly. According to Adamo, “Rats work quite independently from their trainers. They deposit feces on their trainer’s personal affect”... that affects the bath, which allows the animals to be trained by multiple handlers. In addition, due to the small size of the rats, they are less likely to disturb humans or harm those we train, and we can turn our rats into an underbelly ultrasound. They are already close to the military.

In a real minefield, giant pouched rats can usually detect 120 square meters of unexploded ordnance. MDRs say that they have saved 150,000 people from landmines. The rats are taught to find the mine or UXO by searching for soil disturbances in the vicinity of the mine.

Adamo thinks APOPO trainers must be patient above all else. “It is not as simple as it sounds. You need to be a trained rat trainer. You need to be patient and learn to understand how to react with your rats,” he says. For additional references for this article, please visit http://malakal.sudaninfo.org/view.php?aid=34334

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Medical Challenges in Sudan

By Adam Kushner, M.D., M.P.H. [Médecins du Monde]

Working with Médecins du Monde, Dr. Kushner spent 12 weeks with a mission in Malakal, Sudan. This article, written as a journal, is an account of the first six weeks. Through his work, Dr. Kushner has helped many and witnessed the impressive ability of doctors in Malakal to work in stressful and sub-par conditions. He also came face to face with the cholera crisis and worked to get support and supplies for a second Cholera Treatment Center site.

It is the end of my first day in Malakal, Sudan, but all that matters now is the orange stalks accentuating the indigo hues of the clouds, darkness slowly descending after the sun, and the palpable distance.

Across the river, a flat plain extends for miles. Lada grows and shrubs are no houses or signs of activity; it looks like a no-man’s-land. On one side, the stream bends and follows the activity is slowly coming. Long, metal, cane-like boats discharge their passengers or bound up, leaves, rams and kahki bundles of bamboo, bulsa and manha—the building materials throughout the region. The piled stacked and strung in random patterns along the shore. Traders and passengers amble slowly by, some climb into smaller boats and head further up or down the river to neighboring villages. Malakal, the city they will stay for the past two to three months, it surrounded the city only a few kilometers. It is the capital of the Upper Nile state and home to more than 150,000 people. With a Peace agreement reached at the round table between the north and south, the civil war that raged for more than two decades ended. Daily, more and more; rising refugee return to the south seeking jobs and a way to rebuild their lives. They also return to unexploded landmines.

But at the time of the Nile is quiet. Mooses of green and brown and other daubs—small floating islands of vegetation—“You don’t need to be a triathlete to train rats. You need to..." the trainer,” he says. For additional references for this article, please visit http://malakal.sudaninfo.org/view.php?aid=34334

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New home constructed in the minefield in Malakal.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ADAM KUSHNER