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The PROM I

Waiting in the Ground for the Deminers in Kosovo

by Al J. Venter

The PROM-I is a deadly and menacing anti-personnel mine, even as it lies partly on its side. This mine has killed or injured more clearance personnel in the Balkans than all other Yugoslav mines combined.

The PROM-I, the worst in bounding anti-personnel mines and not much bigger than a beer can, is a vicious weapon whose shrapnel can penetrate almost any body armor. It cuts through the average Kevlar helmet like cardboard, as it does often enough for those who try to clear these deadly little bombs, and Kosovo is full of them.

There aren't many mine clearing specialists working in the Balkans who don't have a favorite story about the PROM-I. When one of the teams working there is lucky enough to spot one of these bombs before it finds them (and sometimes there are several, usually laid in clusters) the word is whispered down the line. Most of those on the ground will wait to see what action is taken. Obviously, all mines must be cleared, and that's official. How this is done is what focuses the mind; those working with the stuff know that the PROM-I is a killer.

After Dayton, there were a lot of casualties among those trying to clear PROM-1s. In the words of one American specialist, "They're a bitch to disarm. We just like to blow 'em where we find 'em. PROM-I are not so easy to spot, especially when the ground is thick with grass and shrubs, as it is in the summer in Kosovo. The business part that protrudes above the ground isn't much bigger than a matchbox.

In recent years, during the course of a succession of Balkan wars, it quickly became apparent that most PROM-1s were so unstable that the only way to handle them was to destroy the mines on site. Anything else was invariably a disaster. You only need to brush against any one of the device's tiny prongs and it's over. A bounding mine hurts the bomb a couple of feet into the air and kills everything nearby.

According to Col. Richard Todd, a 23-year American Special Forces veteran with experience in mines and ordinance dating back to Vietnam, you have about a 60 percent chance of being killed if you are within 50 yards of the explosion: "It happens so fast," he said, "that most aren't even aware of what happened." Todd has been working with mines in the Balkans for the past five years and he explained why the PROM-I is deadly. "Unlike the popular 'Yugoslav' PMMA-2, which is the blast mine that you find everywhere in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, the PROM-I is a group fragmentation mine. It was designed around the original German 'S' mine which caused such terrible damage in WWII and in which the Allies notoriously dubbed 'Bouncing Betty.' That's language carried over from the Vietnam era; it's in little use today among mine clearing specialists," he declared.

License To Kill

"The PROM-I has a devastating effect when it blows. It is a bit like a proximity fuse on a mortar or artillery shell exploding a few feet above the ground," Todd suggested. "And because this mine can be laid with multiple trip wires, it has become the obvious weapon of choice among the Serbs. They like it because just one PROM-I can take out a group of people, or even a squad of soldiers on patrol," he continued. "In recent years," said Todd, "it was increasingly deployed in urban areas. They've been laying them in Kosovo as if they're a licence to do so," he said.

Seuell as it is, the PROM-I, a bottle shaped, oval green, can-stem mine, is a complex device. Designed in the textbooks as a "buried, tripwire-activated bounding anti-personnel fragmentation mine," it weighs a little over six pounds. Its single pound of explosives is a combination of Tri Yugoslavia: One Big Mine Field

Almost all the countries that once comprised the old Yugoslavia and that have seen military action in recent years have problems with mines. In parts of Bosnia, it is still dangerous to venture off the road.

about equal proportions. The fuse contains an integral percussion cap "which is what makes it so damned unstable," said one authority. Most of the people who have tried to disarm it have come short fiddling with the business end.

There is controversy about its plastic coated tripwire. Some say dogs can detect it and others reckon they can't. Usually the same color as the terrain, tripwires are difficult to spot under the best conditions and in Kosovo, the Kosovo Liberation Army has had major problems because of the folklore. A proportion of the casualties taken by the guerrilla group before the Allies went in was from mines, some PMMA-2s but also PROM-1s.

The problem is that once tripped, it is impossible to differentiate between the small blast that lifts the bomb out of the ground and the full effect of the explosion, which is devastating. Someone in Angola who once had an armed vehicle trip one in front of him said that both blasts were simultaneous. Any hope of evasive action, consequently, is impossible. More uncommon versions of the same mine such as the PROM-IP and PROM-2 tend to bound a little higher, but they have the same devastating effect.

"Some mean weapon, and not to be trifled with," Todd warned. He heads the U.N. Mine Action Team in Zagreb and has files full of PROM-1 incidents, a lot of which make for some pretty grim reading. Despite multiple warnings, casualties with PROM-1s do happen. A crack international mine clearing team working under U.N. auspices in Croatia had one of its members killed earlier this year. Operating with dogs in an area reduction program, the operator couldn't have spotted the one that either he or the poodles tripped. Two shards of shrapnel penetrated his brain in the explosion that followed and he was killed instantly. Miraculously his dog, working only yards away, was untouched.

The same holds for Croatia. A succession of mine fields, some Serb, the others laid by the Croat Army, stretch down almost the entire length of the country in a half-moon pattern that extends over 500 miles. The mine fields run from Vukovar in the north-east to the Montenegro border. Only the narrow coastal corridor between Sibenik and Sipa remain uncontaminated.

While there are mine fields in dozens of other countries all over the world, those in the Balkans have suddenly acquired a notoriety of their own. What the Serbs did with mines in Croatia and Bosnia, they have
repeated in Kosovo. It is also no secret that Croatian mine fields have become the subjects of close study by a variety of NATO security and intelligence organizations.

**Mines At Garage Sales**

In the Balkans, the Serbs have been making mines for decades, and their stuff is good. By the early 90s, Yugoslavia was earning $2 billion a year from its weapons sales, mostly from Third World buyers. Even today, it is easy to buy any number of Yugoslav mines in East European arms bazaars.

Like it or not, some mines, like the PROM-1 and the anti-tank TMRP-6 (and TMRP-7) as well as the full range of TMA mines, are as good as anything produced in the West. U.N. mine clearing teams are encountering Yugoslav mines in just about every international trouble spot. In places like Angola, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Mozambique you find Yugoslav landmines, often in great quantity.

Now that almost every NATO country is helping in Kosovo, landmines are arguably the single most serious obstacles. As someone once said of mines, they are "serious barriers. As someone once said of mines, they are serious obstacles. As someone once said of mines, they are as good as great quantity. Even today, it is easy to buy any number of Yugoslav mines in East European arms bazaars.

The problem here was that contractually, clearance only extended to 15 meters on either side of the line, which meant that mine fields fringing the line, some of them many acres, remain uncleared because there was no money. The World Bank gave Zagreb a $70 million loan for clearing the bombs. Because the money eventually has to be paid back, the Croats aren't falling over themselves to get the job done. While the mine clearing teams have a handle on the job, the civilians who live and work in these areas don't. Their casualties don't even make the papers any more.

**Land Littered by Bombs**

A few days before I arrived in Gospic, a local was killed after tripping a PROM-1 within a hundred yards of the rail station. He had been walking home from work. A huge hole gouged from the turf was still visible while mine cleaners worked around the spot.

**Clearing for Cash**

There are several categories of mine clearing in the Balkans. The first is humanitarian. Consequently, most effort is invested into commercial projects with economic goals such as at the one around Gospic, about 100 miles south of Zagreb. This involves clearing anti-tank (AT) and anti-personnel (AP) mines around the only rail link running from the capital to the southern coastal cities of Split and Dubrovnik.

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**Roughing It**

The men work seven days a week until the contract is completed. To save money, the men live tough, usually starting the day at six and working through to seven or eight at night. They eat before they start and the next meal is usually when they finish for the day. Time lost to rain is made up afterwards.

Operating under contract with this foreign mine clearing team are 40 Croatian deminers headed by four team leaders. Additional crews (according to Croatian law) include two each of doctors, medics, drivers, dog handlers and ambulances, plus an interpreter, all of whom must be paid for by the contract company. Other companies are similarly bound by red tape, which most foreign contractors think is a legacy of the old political system. It doesn't take any observer long to see that the majority of ancillary personnel are superfluous and therefore a waste of money.

Foreign mine clearance specialists, with whom I spoke, said that while the quality of Croatian mine clearing was good, their rate of clearance was mediocre again, reflecting residual communist ways. Almost all the ex-combatants ventured that if they had been able to bring their own people into the country to do the work, they would have been able to cut much of the crap. Some said that the job would have been completed in half the time.

### Focus

**A moment of bravery:** a deminer concentrates on cutting a tripwire. Photo ©J/VCR
what had once been farmland have become almost forested. Before any clearance work can be done, small trees have to be removed to allow the teams to bring in their equipment.

In some places the undergrowth was so thick it had become impossible to work there. It was also dangerous. Everybody involved in this business knows that mines laid a decade ago don’t become inactive with time. Van Zyl was considering hiring a Caterpillar, though he wasn’t sure what the authorities would say, or the owners of the machine.

**Signs of Disaster**

One of the observations during our visit was that because it lies on a main road heading toward the Dalmatian Coast on the Adriatic Sea, the town of Gosip is often crowded with German and Scandinavian cars heading south for summer. Very few of them are aware that there are mines in the surrounding countryside, and the reason is simple: Zagreb does not allow the authorities to put out any warning signs.

Consequently, said a U.N. official, most people passing through the country and perhaps picnicking en route, have no idea that they might have stopped on the edge of a mine field. “Sometimes I see cars parked with children playing in nearby fields. It’s only a question of time before there is a disaster,” he intimated.

Most of the mine fields, both Serbian and Croatian, are mapped. Todd made the point that just about every day he received calls from former JNA soldiers offering him information about old mine fields. “There is a price, of course,” he continued. “Some want money, others try to use it as leverage to return to their old homes.”

It was notable, travelling about Croatia, that every third or fourth house or farm that we passed had been broken down, burnt or trashed. All had formerly belonged to a very large Serbian community that lived there before the war. Most of the families had been there for centuries. Like Albanian Kosovars, almost all of them had become refugees.

**Postscript**

Since visiting the Mecham operation around Gosip, the company finished its contract and in the two month time frame, lifted about 60 mines of which about two-third were anti-personnel. There were no casualties in that time. That contract, though small by international mine clearing standards, was worth $1.3 million. Mecham has successfully tendered for two more mine-clearing projects, one in the northeast near the Hungarian border which Van Zyl reckons is, “A bastard of a job because of all the booby traps,” and another close to the Dalmatian coast, west of Gosip.

A.J. Venter went into the Balkans twice during the war: once with the U.S. Air Force in a joint-STARS operation and again into old Serbian mine fields where he looked at the threat from up close.

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**Responding to an Emergency**

An Interview with Bob MacPherson, CARE

In an interview with The Journal, Bob MacPherson spoke candidly and honestly about the challenges, successes and lessons learned in effectively responding to an emergency situation. MacPherson is responsible for landmine safety and awareness and is the emergency team leader for CARE. Throughout 1999, he has been in Kosovo coordinating activities so that civilian lives can return to a state of normalcy. Upon finishing our conversation, he was scheduled to fly to Chechnya to try to coordinate relief efforts for that war-ravaged country.

Currently, the Kosovo refugee crisis and the current Chechnya war are vying for first place for the worst humanitarian disaster in Europe since World War II. From March 24, 1999, when NATO began bombing Yugoslavia, until June 10, 1999, when a peace agreement was signed between the Yugoslav government and NATO, more than 1 million ethnic Albanian refugees fled the province of Kosovo. The refugees, many of whom were forced from their homes at gunpoint, crossed over into neighboring Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnian Herzegovina. Hundreds of thousands more were internally displaced within Kosovo’s borders.

Building on its existing presence in the Balkans, CARE launched an immediate emergency response, eventually managing eight refugee camps in Albania and Macedonia housing over 100,000 refugees. CARE had been working in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia since 1993 helping displaced Serb refugees from Bosnia, and in Kosovo. Since 1998 they have been implementing shelter provision and repair, agricultural rehabilitation and mine-awareness training and demining. CARE re-entered Kosovo three days after the first NATO troops and is now working in the Urosevac (known as Ferizaj in Albanian), Kacanik, Lipjan and Mitrovica areas. Over 810,000 refugees have returned to Kosovo from neighboring Albania and Macedonia and other countries. More than 20,000 refugees remain in Macedonia and 4,000 refugees remain in Albania.