

11-2-2001

DDASaccident794

Humanitarian Demining Accident and Incident Database
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DDAS Accident Report

Accident details

Report date: 12/07/2013	Accident number: 794
Accident time: Not recorded	Accident Date: 02/11/2011
Where it occurred: Misurata	Country: Libya
Primary cause: Other (?)	Secondary cause: Management/control inadequacy (?)
Class: Handling accident	Date of main report: 11/03/2012
ID original source: None	Name of source: Press
Organisation: [Name removed]	
Mine/device: Type 84 AT	Ground condition: Not recorded
Date record created:	Date last modified: 12/07/2013
No of victims: 2	No of documents: 1

Map details

Longitude:	Latitude:
Alt. coord. system: Not recorded	Coordinates fixed by:
Map east:	Map north:
Map scale:	Map series:
Map edition:	Map sheet:
Map name:	

Accident Notes

inadequate investigation (?)
no independent investigation available (?)
protective equipment not worn (?)
safety distances ignored (?)
visor not worn or worn raised (?)

Accident report

Access to the report of this accident was refused by the demining group involved when a second accident occurred with the same mine in Libya (see DDAS 795) involving an employee of the same demining group. The only report available was published in the Times newspaper. It is reproduced below, edited for anonymity.

The Sunday Times 11th March 2012

Hero who lost a hand – but lived

Bruised and battered, explosive ordnance disposal technician [The Victim] tells [Name removed] it is a miracle he only lost a hand.

[The Victim] is an expert at defusing bombs. He is also an expert in downplaying real-life drama, especially his own.

“I knew the hand was damaged but I couldn’t see it because my eyes were full of blood. I thought I had gone blind.”

The 55-year-old Briton, surprisingly, smiles when asked to describe his immediate reaction when the Type 84 Chinese anti-tank mine he was trying to neutralise in Misurata, Libya last November blew up, critically wounding him.

“I know it sounds daft but the first thing I did was what every man would do – I checked myself to make sure the ‘family jewels’ were still in place.

“Then I put what was left of my right arm in the air, and grabbed it with my left hand to stop the blood (flowing). Thirdly, I called out to my colleague [Victim No.2] to make sure he was OK, as he was doing the same to me. Probably the fourth thing that went through my mind is my wife’s going to kill me.”

Five operations later, and still sporting the scars of that fateful afternoon, [The Victim] jokes about the shape of the cotton sock enveloping his severed right arm as he slides into the armchair of his room at Sliema’s Preluna Hotel.

“The thing is I shouldn’t be here. I should have come home in a box or I should be learning Braille... or hopping. It’s just a miracle that nothing – apart from my hand – is such a big deal,” he tells The Sunday Times.

During a mission to the then besieged Libyan city, doing what is probably the world’s most dangerous job (employed with NGO [Name removed]), [The Victim] lost his right hand and sustained shrapnel wounds to his abdomen, face and leg.

He opens a scrapbook with his left hand and leafs through the gruesome photos of bloodied flesh, chopped fingers and shrapnel deeply embedded into the bone.

“It’s a bit odd looking. They took a vein out of here and then some flesh and shoved it here. I’ve got another skin graft here,” he says, as though explaining his new home design project.

It was a normal working day at Misurata on November 2. The fighting had ceased by then but all sorts of explosives were still scattered around the fields, which the local farmers were desperate to start ploughing.

“That’s a really big problem for us. Accidents are happening all the time with local people, children especially.”

Armed with his good-luck rubber chicken charm given to him by his wife, [The Victim] set out for another day at the ‘office’ with [Victim No.2], his colleague, to defuse the ill-fated explosive charge. This time, however, the rubber chicken lost all its super powers.

“We knew there were some problems with the device. We hit it with an explosives charge and it seemed to us, based on the information we had then, that it would be safe to move it. That’s when the accident happened.”

Kneeling, [The Victim] picked up the device with his right hand. He was suddenly hurled backwards with the blast and knew something quite serious had happened.

"I couldn't see. It hurt but it wasn't agony. The wound in my leg felt I had just been dead-legged in a rugby match. I knew the hand was damaged but I couldn't see it because my eyes were full of blood. I thought I had gone blind. I knew I'd done something serious to my hand but the drills and skills we had taught ourselves and our guys kicked in. I was being checked for wounds within a minute," he recalls.

"There was no time to think 'oh, I really hurt myself'. It was like 'let's get this done and do it properly'. I know it sounds a bit gung-ho, but if you've got the training it kicks in.

"This is when things started to go right because our guys immediately sprang into action. [Victim No.2] was on his stomach covered in shrapnel to his legs and the back of his head. He was calling in the casualty evacuation and was on the phone to headquarters in Denmark. I was back at our own medic station on site within four minutes, being attended by an international medic within eight minutes and I was in hospital within 45 minutes."

After receiving treatment from the Misurata hospital, he was put on an air ambulance to Tripoli, where he had four operations to remove shrapnel and to stabilise his hand.

[The Victim], who served as an engineer for the British forces in Malta in the 1970s, went on to receive the best treatment at a hospital near Gatwick airport, set up during the Second World War to treat pilots with burns.

Sporting a face still pockmarked with shrapnel, [The Victim] laughs as he recalls the day he walked through Gatwick security prompting incessant beeps from the hand-held metal detector.

"I've got shrapnel all around my eyes, but none in my eyes, which is incredible because I wasn't wearing any eye protection. I've probably been saved for something special in future," he laughs.

[The Victim] believes the explosion was triggered by an element in the device, which the EODs were not aware of. Lessons, he says, have since been learnt and new practices have been put in place, but such a job is never safe enough. Only last week, a young [word removed] colleague was killed by a similar blast in Misurata. He was one of a team sent as replacement to [The Victim].

[The Victim] is not some irrational adrenaline junkie without self-discipline and insists the number of explosive devices in Libya cannot be ignored.

"We did have some problems of supply of explosives and detonators (that day). So actually if we'd had more time, if we weren't in such a dynamic environment we'd probably have slowed down. But in the months leading to that we cleared thousands of items which could have potentially killed somebody," he says.

The two EODs have repeatedly gone over the incident and agree they would not have done it any differently based on the information they had at the time.

Despite the accident, which robbed him of his right hand, [The Victim] refuses to throw in the towel and is still working part-time for the Danish NGO.

"I probably couldn't get into the operations side hands-on, but I can do inspection visits and I plan to run a bomb disposal course in Denmark in July. I can teach 'do as I say not as I do'. They're keen to keep me going and I'm keen to get back into it. But maybe I won't be full hands-on."

He admits until he gets back on the ground and starts dealing with something as dangerous as the device that got him he will not know whether he will pluck up enough courage to return to the job.

"We take a pause and we carry on. It's all about saving lives. At the end of the day it's not about the salary. It's such a worthwhile job. Everyone has that ethos. We know it's

dangerous. We know there are risks and we try to minimise them but we have to accept things like what happened to me.”

Four months on from the accident should he seriously consider settling down in Malta and take on a ‘safe’ job?

[The Victim] giggles, points towards Tower Road, and exclaims: “Have you driven on these roads?”

“I still feel I’ve got something to offer and I think it would be a waste if I didn’t share my knowledge.”

[The Victim] also plans to return to Misurata with [Victim No.2] to thank those who helped get him out when injured.

“I don’t like the word closure, but it would be good for the boys there to see us, especially after we lost a guy last week.”

Victim Report

Victim number: 984	Name: [Name removed]
Age: 55	Gender: Male
Status: supervisory	Fit for work: yes
Compensation: Not made available	Time to hospital: Not recorded
Protection issued: Not recorded	Protection used: None

Summary of injuries:

INJURIES: severe Face; severe Leg

AMPUTATION/LOSS: Hand

COMMENT: No Medical report was made available.

Victim Report

Victim number: 985	Name: [Name removed]
Age:	Gender: Male
Status: supervisory	Fit for work: yes
Compensation: Not made available	Time to hospital: Not recorded
Protection issued: Not recorded	Protection used: None

Summary of injuries:

INJURIES: severe Head: severe Legs

COMMENT: No Medical report was made available

Analysis

The problem of dealing with munitions thrown out from ammunition storage areas by aerial bombing is not new, but the scale of the problem in Libya was unique. The Demining Group moved in quickly and its rules and procedures were improvised. In emergency humanitarian situations, such actions are justified.

The primary cause of this accident is listed as "Other" because the Victim was deliberately interacting with the mine in a way that he believed was safe. The Type 84 scatterable AT mine was unknown and experience led the Victims to believe that they were dealing with it appropriately. The secondary cause is listed as a "Management Control Inadequacy" because managers failed to provide appropriate support to their field operatives. They should have requested information on the device but instead, they kept as quiet as possible about the details of the accident, so leaving the way open for repeated accidents. See DDASaccident795 in which the same demining group had a fatal accident with the same device a few months later.