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Unsung Hero: Johan van der Merwe

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North embarked on numerous humanitarian mine action missions and tasks with the Danish, including teaching a humanitarian mine clearance management course with the Swedish Rescue Services Agency. His next mission was a trip to Angola, where he was responsible for conducting research on mine clearance opportunities and collaborating with other agencies in Angola. On completion of this mission, North took a position in Iraq heading the initial deployment of Handicap International personnel into the country.

Wanting to remain in the country, North was forced to find another job when he withdrew from Iraq in April 2004. “I took a position in Iraq with RONCO, where I was part of the national QA/QC team,” says North. The quality assurance/quality control team was short-lived in Iraq. RONCO, an international humanitarian mine action consulting corporation, redeployed North to Sudan. Since then, he has returned to Iraq to head a training school for Iraqi army EOD companies up to level three EOD—a total of 600 men intake first year.

Each new task and location has offered North heightened knowledge and experiences. He not only gets satisfaction from changing the lives of others affected by landmines, but he is also aware that his involvement in humanitarian mine action has affected him personally and molded him into the individual he is today. “I feel I have grown as a relatively selfish person, concerned only with my life and my family’s welfare, into a more open and aware person who cares about the plight of the people affected by war and by post-war difficulties,” he admits. “Still, I need to work in this trade to earn a living and that the money is not the most important thing. There has to be an element of doing good, feeling good about doing good, and I have to feel that what I am involved in is worthwhile.”

One of the ways North deals with the hardships of mine action is by expressing his feelings through his poetry. His mine-related poetry has been published in four books: Risky Business, War Trade, Victory and Distance Shore.

“I think my poetry was purely a means by which I was able to cope with some disturbing episodes and encounters in my life,” says North. His poems not only help North survive his personal experiences, but also help others in the field know that they are not alone: “Some of the poems have been used in documentary films and I hope they have helped to convey to others some of the realities of the mine problem in the world,” explains North. Some of his poems also have been used by churches and other organizations as fundraising publicity materials, he adds.

While North has seen mine action as a positive influence in his life and in the world, he agrees there is much to be improved upon. “Without too much political influence, the drive behind the prioritization structure needs to be balanced between purely humanitarian need and national emergency infrastructure requirements,” North says. “International donors should consider their efforts to be [better] able to direct [global] countries to be an important issue in demining. Safety is always overlooked in reporting all clearance accidents because the benefits of the demining community need to be improved upon.”

North also feels obliged to offer advice to others who may be new to the field: “Don’t panic when you take a long time to clear land and be an accountable and responsible soldier,” he says. “Don’t expect to stop anti-tank mines and catch on fire,” he says. He was lucky—the other three men affected by the explosion in the vehicle died, “I was able to walk away a year or so due to luck.”

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Working for the United Nations—van der Merwe hopes to continue the fight against landmines and uphold the standards of past and current mine action practitioners. "In my country's case, I try to represent the many thousands of incapacitated and local mine action practitioners out there," he says. As a member of the IMAS Review Board, I try to ensure that the standards are written in such a way that they provide global guidance for those that have to work with them and that they decrease the risk of engaging in mine action activities. Also, when creating a statement of work, van der Merwe rules to make it clear for firms and governmental organizations to get the job done safely and easily. "It is not my intention to cause a contractual nightmare that is impossible to implement."

According to van der Merwe, global mine action is due for a change in strategy and methods. "I would like to set a more unified, smart, and circular approach to dealing with the global mine problem," he says. "Our approach to dealing with the problem has not changed very much over the past few years. The recipe has been: find the cause, establish a mine action authority, provide the information, and assist organizations for mine action and provide technical advisors, etc." However, van der Merwe feels that the mine action community should deal with each country differently depending on the magnitude of its mine problem. "Countries with full-fledged program with permanent local capacities would need to spend more time in capacity-building of both governmental institutions and local operational capacities and will need adjusted long-term funding to do so."

Additionally, van der Merwe has a number of suggestions that he feels could improve mine action. First, lets say that I would like to see a greater cohesion among all stakeholders to work toward a common mine action goal. We need to set aside individual aspirations, political goals and decide what we want to achieve over the next five years. He also suggests the mine action community design response plans instead of using template solutions that are applied from country to country. Another important activity would be to continue the training of mine action practitioners at all levels. Although there is much to be improved upon, van der Merwe feels that his and other mine action practitioners' efforts have made a lot of progress and helped to bring the way for future success.

Van der Merwe's experiences in mine action over the last 10 years have given him a wealth of unforgettable memories. Meeting celebrities and public figures was not something he expected when he entered the mine field. "An event such as the Queen of England opening UNDP and the U.N. office for the Lethem project, van der Merwe says. "It continues in this role.

Van der Merwe's job entails a number of responsibilities, but he enjoys working with all mine action practitioners and managers. "My role as the technical advisor is to assist the mine action portfolio managers with all the technical issues related to organizational structures, job descriptions, interpretation of systems, specifications of specialized equipment, statements of work for tenders and contracts for services," he explains. "I also provide important technical advice to the U.N. program managers and project staff in the field."

Working closely with colleagues in UNMAS and UNDP, van der Merwe states, "I have been fortunate to be involved in most of the major advances that have been made in mine action since 1996. There have included in our hands of preparing the International Mine Action Standards, assisting with the design and initial UNOPS implementation of the U.N. Mine Action Strategy and the Framework for Rapid Response, and helping many other mining groups carry out mine action research."

In 1996, he was offered a position by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs as deputy program manager of the U.N. Mine Action Programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He arrived in Sarajevo in September 1996, and immediately took up my assignment with the rest of the mine action team, van der Merwe says. Under the direction of Program Manager Georges Focsaneanu, van der Merwe felt privileged because not only did van der Merwe and Focsaneanu become good friends, but he also introduced me to humanitarian mine action, he says. After Focsaneanu stepped down as program manager in July 1997, van der Merwe took his place until mid-1998. Focsaneanu has only praise for his successor. "I have known van der Merwe for years and he has always been willing to assist and help anyone. He has put all his efforts and heart and soul into addressing the problem of landmines and the affected people," Focsaneanu says. "I can think of no one who has assisted more people and programs in the field of mine action."