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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 HI, including teaching a humanitarian mine clearance managers’ course to 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. Upon 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 HI withdrew from Iraq in April 2004. “I took a position in Iraq with RONCO, where I was part of the national O&M 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 Iraq army EOD companies up to level three EOD—a total of 600 men in the 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 from 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 post-war difficulties,” he admits. “I still need to work in this trade to earn a living, but the money is not the most important thing. There has to be some 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 harsh realities of mine action is by expressing his feelings through poetry. His mine-related poetry has been published in four books: Risky Business, War Trade, Victory and Distance Shore.

“Initially, my poetry was purely a means by which I could express how I felt, and dealt with, some disturbing episodes and experiences in my life,” says North. “The poems not only help North survive his personal struggles with the landmine plight, but many of them 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 have also been used by charities 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 security requirements,” he says. “International demining strategies start to be [better] able to direct their global strategy to an important issue in demining: Safety is always in need of improvement.”

“Some of the poems also help to build and sustain a small capacity of funds,” he adds. “One of the perks of working in mine action is traveling all over the world and experiencing new places. North found there are a few inherent characteristics of mine action, “There is always a great feeling of hope, of optimism, of the hardness of the hardship. All people who have lost everything—people who are living in rebuilding their lives and are doing their utmost level of quality of life. This is a truly admirable trait that is evident worldwide.”

With people like Chris North leading the path to change, it’s no wonder those who suffer from the aftereffects of war are hopeful.

Charlotte Dombrower
Mine Action Information Center

Johan van der Merwe

Looking back at the injury that ended his military career in 1984, van der Merwe reflects on his life and work. “I served in both northern Namibia and southern Angola, and while serving there, one of my assignments was to investigate many of the mine incidents involving both military personnel and civilians,” he says. This experience and others led him to dedicate his life to humanitarian mine action.

One of the most traumatizing—and influential—events in van der Merwe’s life was his involvement in two demining accidents. “In the one incident in 1981, I sustained 15 percent second- and third-degree burn wounds after the vehicle I was traveling in detonated two anti-tank mines and caught on fire,” he says. He was lucky—the other three men affected by the explosion in the vehicle died.

Van der Merwe’s life and views on what needs to be done to create a safer world...

by Charlotte Dombrower [ Mine Action Information Center ]

JOURNAL: Unsung Hero: Johan van der Merwe

Working as a technical advisor for the United Nations Office for Project Services, Johan (JJ) van der Merwe has gone above and beyond the call of duty. He has been influential in assisting the United Nations establish and implement mine action programs worldwide.

Van der Merwe’s work as a combat engineer with the South African Defense Force led him to mine action. He was trained in demolition, mine/countermine warfare, explosion ordnance disposal and improvised explosive devices disposal. “I served in both northern Namibia and southern Angola, and while serving there, one of my assignments was to investigate many of the mine incidents involving both military personnel and civilians,” he says. This experience and others led him to dedicate his life to humanitarian mine action.

One of the most traumatizing—and influential—events in van der Merwe’s life was his involvement in two demining accidents. “In the one incident in 1981, I sustained 15 percent second- and third-degree burn wounds after the vehicle I was traveling in detonated two anti-tank mines and caught on fire,” he says. He was lucky—the other three men affected by the explosion in the vehicle died.

Although van der Merwe survived the accident, his near-death experience limited him in the hospital, where he spent three months in intensive care recovering from his injuries. This experience did not deter him from his military career. “I was afraid to go back to continue to work,” he says. “Even though I remained in the army after the incident, I realized the terrible destructions of landmines and the need to abolish them.”

Unfortunately, van der Merwe’s brushes with death were not over. In 1984, he was involved in another landmine accident while traveling in northern Angola during a military campaign carried out by the South African Defense Force. Similar to the prior incident, he was traveling in a vehicle when...
Personal experiences with landmines and 10 years of working in mine action have shaped Johan van der Merwe’s life and views on what needs to be done to create a safer world.

Van der Merwe joined the United Nations Office of Project Services mine action team in 1998, initially as a technical advisor for the Iraq program, but he also worked in the field, and in the mine action technical advisor position in UNOPS became “very familiar with the problem,” as he states.

Van der Merwe joined the U.N. Mine Action Programme in Bosnian and Herzegovina. “I arrived in Sarajevo in September 1993, and immediately took up my assignment with the rest of the mine action team,” he says.

Under the direction of Program Manager George 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-March 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 provided first-person knowledge to the field of mine action.”

Van der Merwe’s job entails a number of responsibilities, but he remains willing to aid other mine action practitioners and managers. “My role is to provide technical advice to the U.N. program managers and technical staff in the field,” he says.

Working closely with colleagues in UNMAS and UNDP, van der Merwe states, “I have been fortunate to meet and work with many mine action practitioners and managers. My role as the technical advisor is to support those involved in mine action.”

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 well-gelled program with government capabilities and expertise, for example, would be assisted very quickly to rid themselves of the problem,” he says. “Countries with large landmine problems, we will need to spend more time in capacity-building of local government and local governmental and local governmental and local governmental and local governmental and local governmental and local institutional leadership and skills to handle the problem.”

Van der Merwe has a number of suggestions that he feels could improve mine action. First, let’s try to “see the bigger picture,” he says. “We should see the problem from a country, and the bigger picture of the country, to the United States.”

Van der Merwe has left his mark on the United Nations Mine Action Centre in Sarajevo, where he relied on his contacts and networks to raise funds for the cause.”

Van der Merwe also feels Messier has helped to “have so much progress and helped to get the way for future success.”

Van der Merwe also feels that the mine action community should be aware of the importance of “assisting the mine action practitioners with the technical issues related to organizational structures, job descriptions, interpretation of systems, specifications for special equipment, statements of work for tenders and contracts for services,” he explains. “We also provide support to the technical staff on the fund raising and technical staff on the fund raising.”

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