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Bombs Away: A Proactive Approach

UXO clearance in Guam and the Pacific Islands is considered mostly "emergency removal." The Journal examines how improper disposal, fatalities and a lack of survey or accident data compounds the problem for this region.

by Lisa M. Vanada, MAIC

In 1941, Japanese forces invaded Guam, making it the only populated U.S. territory to endure foreign occupation. Three years later the United States recovered Guam and drove the Japanese from the island. The bloodbath from the conflict continues throughout Guam, Saipan, Tinian and Palau over 50 years later, due to the UXO and landmines that still pollute the islands. Although the United States provides mine clearance services to the area, Paul Murray, president of Bombs Away, a UXO-specializing firm primarily servicing Micronesia and Southeast Asia, expressed his concern that this mine action may not be sufficient.

The U.S. military EOD teams participate in over 225 emergency UXO/landmine clearance operations in Guam every year. Unfortunately, this figure only reflects situations where emergency assistance was specifically requested. The Navy EOD unit stationed on Guam scours a six-man EOD detachment as a response team only; they are not authorized to locate and clear mines under their own initiative. This means that hundreds of undetected mines lay in wait. Murray demonstrated his frustration with a question: "How do you think most of these mines are found?" The mine-related death and injury statistics provide the answer: children and construction workers frequently find these mines, often with fatal results.

The U.S. military estimates that 25 percent of all ordnance used during World War II failed to detonate as intended. In spite of ongoing clearance, mines still litter Pacific Island battle sites. Murray believes the demining process could be greatly accelerated with a proactive mine clearance approach that encompasses thoroughness, historical research and initiative.

Background

As a former member of U.S. Navy EOD teams, Paul Murray has extensive military demining experience. He was awarded the Navy Commendation for Valor after contractor to clear bombs from a channel. The contractor wanted to dredge the channel through the mangroves, but it was contaminated with 500-pound bombs. Bombs Away divers placed slings beneath the bombs and using diving regulators to fill lift bags to haul the bombs to the water's surface. It would have been simple to discard the bombs in a nearby uninhabited forest. Instead, the team took the time and effort to transport the bombs across the town to a remote munitions dump.

UXO disposal problems also exist in Guam. Construction companies are rapidly developing the island to clear the land for businesses and homes. Because there are few regulations, many construction companies focus primarily on immediate profit, and little concern is given to the next developer. Murray said that the workers "dig up UXO and throw it on the next piece of undeveloped property." This method may remove the danger from a specific area but it adds to the UXO problems in the remaining land. Government regulations and professional standards must be altered to consider the long-term effects of mine action.

Initiative with Historical Research

History and statistics indicate that the Pacific Rim is heavily contaminated with UXO, but many of the governments lack solid policies and mine action support. Guam was the site of some of the heaviest pre-invasion bombardment in World War II. The island endured heavy bombing and shelling for several weeks prior to the U.S. military's land invasion, and millions of ordnance items were scattered throughout the Pacific Rim. Dud rates conclude that 25 percent of the ordnance failed to detonate, and these abandoned items present a high risk to local residents. If the governments and existing mine clearance organizations would adopt a proactive stance, the risk for children and civilians would decrease.

Some of the existing safety policies produce negative interaction among the workers, who consider some of the policies to be contrary and contradictory. Murray believes that the overall safety of the islands could be improved if the deminers applied proactive methods. Job specifications could be improved with research and should include history, terrain and prior mine activity. Reliable safety precautions, such as UXO sweeps prior to earthmoving, should also be incorporated.

Murray emphasizes the role history plays as a UXO indicator and admitted that he has yet to understand why the government infrequently initiates clearance operations on major battle sites known for UXO contamination. The beaches on the west coast of Guam near Agat were stormed frequently during World War II. As a known area of conflict, the risk for UXO contamination in that region is high. After a heavy rainstorm, a Chamorro (native) boy found a hand grenade in the sand. Although it was compromised by moisture, the grenade began smoking when he picked it up. He immediately threw it 20 feet away, but the weak explosion injured his foot. Most government and military mine operations are formed as a response to a recent call, not a response to the problem that created 55 years ago. Emphasis should be placed on initiative, and the governments should use historical records and Chamorro reports to proactively clear mines and prevent accidents.

Cooperation and Support

Although successful demining projects rely on technical expertise, training, experience and extensive
Photographing Tragedy

Photographing Tragedy: Landmines and Victims

Tim Grant recounts his experiences capturing the images of landmines and the stories of their victims on film. From buckets of AP mines to victims on the operating table, Grant sees and tells all about the images that have shaped him.

By Tim Grant, Landmine Photographer

Landmines are insidious devices. A landmine can be any munition placed under, on or near the ground or other surface area that is designed to be detonated or exploded by the presence, proximity or contact of a person or vehicle. Their main purpose is to inflict severe injury on the “enemy” so as to hinder advance and undermine the morale. Only a few mines are designed to kill outright. For every combatant injured it takes another two soldiers to carry them, effectively taking up to three fighters out of the battle.

My initial experiences with landmines came as an employee of the Land Mine Awareness Programme (LMAP) that started in 1998 on the Thai/Cambodian border. After testing the education materials we had produced, it was found that the people wanted to see photographs of real mines and of landmine victims. The mines reproduced in the photographs were always shown as close as possible to their actual size. After several years of working in mine awareness, we found that photographs were very popular, generating much more interest than illustrations because people can relate more to them, especially when the images are taken in areas familiar to them.

Photographing my first mine was an experience I shall always remember. At that time, it was illegal for foreigners

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Landmines and Victims