

## The Clearest Sense of Danger

Captain Hernández recounts his story of how training classes and stepping into a mine field are two very different circumstances. Though the dangers are terrifying, it is the humanitarian rewards that keep this deminer going back.

■ "Every mine found is an accomplishment."  
—Capt. Frank A. Zurita  
c/o AP



by Captain Frank A. Zurita  
Hernández, MARMINCA

It is not possible to imagine what a mine field is really like until stepping into one. Before becoming a member of a group of international demining supervisors provided by the Inter-

American Defense Board (IADB), my knowledge of landmines was limited to the theoretical training I had received at the Venezuelan Military Academy and during officer training courses. When I arrived in Nicaragua to join the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America (known

as MARMINCA), I did not have a clear picture of the country's situation. I knew that in the 1970s and 1980s there had been a bloody internal struggle in Nicaragua, but I did not learn that landmines had been used in this conflict until after I was assigned to the mission.

During my first week of orientation and training, I became familiar with the Organization of American States (OAS) demining program and with the functions of MARMINCA. Immediately following this, I was assigned to the city of Juigalpa, located in the Department of Chontales, where the headquarters for Operational Front Number 3 was located. The work in this region is very diverse, with mine fields located primarily near bridges and high-tension towers.

My first contact with landmines took place near a bridge. The mine situation around bridges in Nicaragua is unique due to the effects of Hurricane Mitch, which struck the country in 1998. This devastating storm affected nearly all of Nicaragua, as rivers flooded washing out many bridges. As a result, some mines were carried off by floodwaters and deposited, in some instances, thousands of meters away, increasing the risk of accidents and forcing us to widen our search patterns. In addition, mines that were not displaced were covered with



■ Supervisors play key roles when challenging situations arise in the field. c/o IADB

more than a meter of mud and rocks rendering mine detectors useless in some cases.

Tackling this type of work demands a great deal of knowledge and experience. In this regard, the Nicaraguan Army, having been involved with the program for four years, has many experienced deminers among its ranks. With respect to the international supervisors, experience consists not only of the time spent working with mines, but also in the ability to manage challenging situations. The experienced deminer's principal enemy is overconfidence, and overconfidence in this field can kill. An international supervisor must always guard against this overconfidence, which results in constant exposure to danger and must always consider the fact that something could go wrong. Therefore, deminers and supervisors must work as a single team, with their success dependent on the level of communication they achieve.

The first time I entered a mine field, I felt the clearest sense of danger I have ever felt in my life. Despite having a metal detector and protective equipment, with each step I wondered if there would be a mine where I

walked. With time, this sensation tends to disappear, but it is a good idea to maintain this feeling to some extent and use it on occasion. Mines are the

enemy and in a way, man's ingeniousness in creating them is surprising. They are weapons that can change the lives of those who have the misfortune of encountering them and survive their terrible effects. The most dangerous of these is the PP-Mi-Sr-II, which was manufactured in former Czechoslovakia and is capable of spreading 1500 shrapnel fragments over a 50-meter radius. Others like the PMN, PMD-6 and the POMZ-2 are also common and dangerous in their own right, but their psychological effect in a mine field is less than that of the PP-Mi-Sr-II.

Not only men and machines fight against these weapons. Technology will never surpass nature, which is why we depend on another asset: the dog. The instincts of these animals are more impressive than one can imagine. Watching them work, sniffing the terrain and then signaling the discovery

**"Far from the dangers and implications associated with this delicate, difficult mission, there is also joy. When I visit the dusty roads that lead to the small communities in Nicaragua and see neatly uniformed children on their way to school, I can fully understand and appreciate the humanitarian side of this mission. Every year, community members become victims of this terrible product of war. For this reason, every mine found is an accomplishment: it is the guarantee that a child will be alive and healthy, it is the satisfaction of seeing the people from this noble country freely cultivating and farming their land, it is synonymous with development, and finally, it is a personal triumph."**

■ Capt. Hernández feels over confidence can be a deminer's enemy.  
c/o IADB



of a mine, convinced me that nature has no limits. These “4x4’s,” as they are affectionately known, are part of our family and are treated like true deminers.

As an international supervisor, I am very proud to represent my country and to participate in this program. Since my assignment to the demining program, I have participated in the destruction of 354 AP mines and more than 300 pieces of UXO. I have gained experience working with the armed forces of different countries and have made these colleagues my family while serving in this country. I am not ready to leave and there are many more mines to destroy but when the time arrives for me to depart, I will go convinced that the supervisors will continue to ensure others' safety. ■

### Biography

Capt. Frank A. Zurita Hernández was born on January 8, 1968, in Caracas, Venezuela. He entered the Venezuelan Military Academy in 1986. In 1990, he was awarded a scholarship to culminate his studies at the Saint Cyr Military Academy in France and went on, from 1991 to 1992, to carry out a basic armored cavalry course in the Saumur College in France. In 1992, he went on to perform duties as a Tactical Officer in the Venezuelan Military Academy and graduated from a mid-level course in armored cavalry in the Col. Juan Guillermo Iribarren College in Venezuela. In 1994, he carried out his duties as the Squad Commander of the 5102 motorized cavalry squadron and became an Officer In-

structor of the Venezuelan College of Armored Cavalry. From 1996 to 1998, he worked as Officer of the Military House of the Presidency of the Venezuelan Republic. In 1999, he completed a one-year term as Personnel Officer of the Venezuelan Army's College of Equitation. During this time, he was also the company commander of Headquarters Battalion “Daniel Florencio O’Leary.”

From June 2000 to June 2001, Capt. Frank A. Zurita Hernández was commissioned as an international supervisor of MARMINCA in Nicaragua.

### Contact Information

Capt. Frank A. Zurita Hernández  
E-mail: [marminca@lbw.com.ni](mailto:marminca@lbw.com.ni)