

Interview with an Amateur Deminer

After losing a bull and a pig to landmines in his fields, a Nicaraguan farmer undertakes the arduous task of meticulously removing 500 AP mines from his farm. The Nicaraguan Army discourages amateur demining because of the danger, but many who depend on the land for survival resort to mine clearance to make their plots safe and usable.

■ José Luis Soza Arguello demonstrates how he lifted and removed mines with a shovel.



by Russell Gasser, *Joseph Rowntree Quaker Fellow*

Man's Work with God's Help

Some people would consider José Soza a lucky man, but he prefers to speak of God helping him in his work. José owns a small farm in the village of Lisawe in the center of Nicaragua, a zone where the Contra war was active for several years, and the Sandinista Army laid defensive strip mine fields around its bases and com-

mand posts. Three rows of PMN anti-personnel mines were spaced at about 1-m (3-ft) intervals in each direction, with stranded wire fences on each side of the mined strip. The mines are still there, but the fences have not always survived.

After the end of the war, José received title to a small parcel of hilltop land where a Command Post had been. Before leaving, the army cleared the site of UXO but did not have the resources to immediately clear the mines; hence, José's farm was put on

the waiting list, which could mean waiting for several years. So he went ahead and cleared about 500 mines by himself.

Even though I arrived unannounced, José greeted me warmly and sat down on the porch of his wooden house to answer my questions. "Why did you clear the mines?" I wondered. "Wouldn't it have been easier and safer to repair the fences on each side of the mine field?" "Well," he replied in a serious manner, "for several reasons. I can't afford to lose any more animals; I only have two cows, a mule and a horse. Already a bull and a pig have been killed by mines, and some-

one else lost a horse. Every year, at the end of the dry season we burn the undergrowth before planting and several mines explode, which is very dangerous. I have my children, 11, 8 and 5 years old, who don't pay enough attention to staying away from the mines. I can tell you that in another village two boys found a mine and took it home to play with. (Coming from a poor family, they had no other toys at all.) The mine exploded and one boy was very badly wounded, but the other escaped with some bruises and a big scare." José shakes

his head as he tells me this, but he's very matter-of-fact about the accident. Life is precarious for local people, and many poor children die from illness or accidents.

He continues with a bit more animation, "Most of all I got really fed up with local people breaking down the fences and coming on to my land to steal the mines to use for [illegal] fishing in the river. Even though some careless people have been killed while taking the explosives out of mines, many people still want to get hold of them. Two men found a mine in the bottom of a ditch and got a long stick to hit it with until it went off. They were lucky, as the ditch protected them and they were only bruised by the blast."

Amateur Demining Technique

José took me out to his former mine field which is still a bit overgrown. Wearing rubber boots and carrying the only tools that he owns, a shovel and a machete, he looked just like any campesino farmer going to tend his land. As we walked down the road, he explained that there had originally been about 600 mines and 100 of these had detonated or been stolen. Of the 500 mines he cleared, nearly 200 still had the safety pin fitted. "The people who laid them had been reservists and recent recruits who didn't understand mines and didn't like to take the risk of removing the safety pin in case the mine went off," he explained.

We crossed into the formerly mined area and he showed me his technique for finding the mines, many of which were either laid on or very near the surface. By working out the pattern of the mines, he could guess where the next one would be and gently tapped the ground with the tip of his long machete. "Where there is a buried mine you can easily hear the difference," he said. "It's a hollow

sound not like tapping the ground." Starting on one side of the mine he would excavate all around it with the machete and then scoop up the mine in a shovel held at arm's length, then carefully turn it over so that the pressure-sensitive face was hidden.

"Once I had removed a mine I would stand where it had been and reach out to the next one." "But what about mines that were not laid in the pattern?" "No," he insists, "they were all there and I took them all out." I try a different angle: "But what if someone made a mistake and put a mine in the wrong place? Would you have found it?" The same answer comes back, "I'm sure I got all the mines." He sees the care that I take to walk exactly where he has already stepped and patiently explains yet again that I can stand wherever I want as there are no mines left. "Okay," I

say, and we both smile, but I still do not share his total confidence and go on walking in his footsteps.

Danger for Amateur Deminers

A few days later, Major Sandoval of the Nicaraguan Army confirms my fears and insists that unless the officer in charge was very inexperienced, he would have left a few extra mines out of pattern to catch unwary deminers. Sandoval, a precise, quietly-spoken military engineer with 22 years of service, explains that the army really wants to discourage this type of informal demining as it is simply too dangerous. We discussed the well-known case of another amateur deminer from the north of Nicaragua who lost his leg in an accident and then went back to demining and lost his other leg in a second accident.



■ José Arguello shows a pit where he buried about 150 PMN mines.

■ José Arguello walks down the main street of Lisawe, Nicaragua with his mine clearing tools: a shovel and a machete.

"What happens," the Major said, "is that you get someone who knows a little about mines and then everyone wants the local "expert" to come and clear the land for them. They buy them drinks and tell them how good they are at demining just to get them going and promise to pay them, and the person gets hurt or killed. People who fall for that line and think they know it all are not going to be the right sort of people to do the work anyway."

Not far from where José lives is the town of Mulukukú where another local amateur deminer, Erasmo Ochoa, had cleared land for a large landowner who promised that he would pay Ochoa well. After removing 200 mines from a dense three-row strip, the landowner would only pay \$200, and Erasmo went away disgusted and swearing he would never touch a mine again. The extremes of rural poverty in Nicaragua may force him to change his mind.

José strikes me as different from these others who cleared mines for payment. He only demined for himself and was clearly a man who knew his own mind and would not be talked into anything. As a member of an evangelical church, he doesn't drink and before beginning the work, he tried to get some help. As he explained: "When I started I went to the local army HQ and asked for help, and the people I talked to showed me how to disarm these mines, but I didn't really trust what I learned." This caution is a surprise as the PMN is an easy mine to disarm.



So how did he dispose of the mines? "I carefully dropped them into deep holes, one by one. It took me over two months to move the mines. I carried them on my shovel held as far away from my body as possible, and I put about 150 over there in a deep trench, another 100 there in a hole about 3m (10 feet) deep and a lot down an old pit latrine that was over 3m deep. No one else knows where they are except my wife. If I told anyone, then people [would] start to dig them up again for fishing."

One day, of course, someone is going to have to dig up those mines to dispose of them properly, but that

is in the future, and José is more than happy to leave final disposal to the experts. As I took one last photo before departing, he smiled and repeated: "I don't regret doing it." ■

**All photos courtesy of the author.*

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