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JJ Scott
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Using groundbreaking new ideas and ingenious combinations of favorite demining methods, the Kosovo Mine Action Coordination Center (MACC) has succeeded in clearing the province of landmines in less than three years. Mr. John Flanagan, MACC Program Manager, offers insights on the MACC’s accomplishments and a vision for the future of mine action.

by JJ Scott, MACC

Introduction

June 10, 1999: The NATO Secretary General announced the suspension of NATO air strikes in Kosovo. After seven days of relentless bombing, Yugoslav and Serbian forces had agreed to withdraw from Kosovo territory, clearing the way for deployment of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, the Kosovo Stabilization Force (KFOR). Simultaneously, the UN declared the establishment of the UN Interim Administration for Kosovo (UNMIK), mandating that this body “promote an atmosphere of security and safety that will enable all refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to enjoy the right to return freely to their homes and to live in conditions in which the highest standards of human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected.” The UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) recognized the threat that landmines and UXO posed to the success of this goal and set about developing a program to deal with these hazards.

One week later, with KFOR entrenched and the Serbians extracted, the Kosovo Mine Action Coordination Center (MACC) opened for business with John Flanagan serving as the MACC’s Program Manager. Under his leadership, the Kosovo demining program swept the country clean of threatening landmines and UXO in just over two years, an unprecedented achievement. In December 2001, Mr. Flanagan declared Kosovo’s UXO threat to be comparable to that of any other European country, thus accomplishing the MACC’s primary mission.

Although Kosovo’s initial landmine and UXO situation was unique in some respects, several lessons learned there can be applied to future mine action programs (MAPs). Mr. Flanagan believes that if every MAP used demining methods appropriate to their unique situations, the worldwide landmine problem could be solved in a relatively short time—much sooner than most in the demining community consider possible. Some of his insights are introduced below as I outline the Kosovo MACC from top to bottom, hopefully illuminating all of the imaginative answers this program used to solve mine action’s toughest questions.

The Kosovo MACC

Organization

With only seven days elapsing between conception and implementation of the program, it is amazing just how many acronyms stand between the UN and the Kosovo MACC. The UN established UNMIK and gave the administration a mandate that included providing for the safe return of thousands of IDPs. Because landmines and UXO presented such a hazard to returning civilians, UNMIK became involved. Officials at UNMAS chose the UN Office for Program Services (UNOPS) to design an UNMIK Mine Action Program (MAP), which they charged with all coordination activities surrounding the demining of Kosovo. That MAP became known as the Kosovo Mine Action Coordination Center (MACC). As a coordinating body, the MACC had no demining assets of its own, instead relying on other organizations to carry out all operations. Mr. Flanagan explained, “One of the key differences in the establishment of the Kosovo MACC was the extra ‘C’ in our name. The MACC was deliberately set up as a ‘coordinating’ center, rather than the more traditional mine action center.” Other UN departments, NGOs and corporations provided all deployable machinery, manpower and commodities. This setup allowed each organization to focus on its specialty areas while the MACC worked on integrating all activities. For example, while MINE-TECH performed demining operations in western Kosovo on land previously surveyed by the HALO Trust, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Handicap International (HI) simultaneously conducted mine awareness and victim assistance programs in the same areas. The MACC concentrated solely on directing the work of all organizations involved to ensure maximum efficiency.

A new “Senior Partner” system was also implemented by the MACC to help spread authority and coordination responsibilities among the different organizations in each of the many facets of mine action. Under this arrangement, some of the major clearance and awareness organizations acted as coordinators at the local level, thus eliminating unnecessary additional infrastructure and personnel costs. This scenario also allowed these organizations a sense of pride and ownership over their parts of the program, theoretically increasing the quality of their work.

Mission Statement

The MACC’s stated goals were deceptively simple and straightforward: “Replicate the situation that exists in virtually all European countries that have experienced conflict during the 20th Century, and do it within three years.” In this condition, citizens may periodically find scattered mines and UXO remaining after clearance, but they have been trained to safely handle the situation. Landmines and UXO pose only the smallest threat to civilians as they go about rebuilding their economic and social lives. The goal in Kosovo was not 100 percent clearance. The MACC estimated that completely clearing the entire country would have taken 30 to 50 years using standard manual demining methods. Obviously, that timeframe would not allow Kosovo to rebuild in a timely manner. So the MACC adopted a different tactic, realizing a 100 percent safety guarantee (after five decades) for the immediate improvement of most Kosovars’ lives and a small amount of residual risk. The MACC attempted to minimize civilian impact as quickly and efficiently as possible, thus helping the most people in the least amount of time. Realizing this goal required some innovative methodology by the MACC, as no previous MAP had ever laid out such ambitious goals within such a limited timeframe.

The MACC’s Five Principles

The Kosovo MACC quickly established five principles to form the foundation upon which to build the rest of the program. Stressing efficiency, speed and safety, the MACC focused on:

- Integrated Mine Action
- Information Management
- Threat Assessment
- Risk Management
- Quality Management

Using new strategies and proven techniques, the Kosovo MACC delivered on its promises by following these principles faithfully. Examples of the novel combinations used by the MACC are outlined below.

Integration

The MACC needed to address each of the four pillars of mine action—mine clearance, mine awareness, victim assistance and advocacy—and they needed to do it quickly and efficiently. They soon determined that they needed to integrate mine action activities on an unprecedented scale. Effective integration involves the concurrent execution of various aspects of mine action to eliminate redundancy and wasted effort. For example, groups might conduct mine awareness simultaneously with demining operations in a village, as explained above. Effectively integrating all four pillars allowed the MACC to accomplish their lofty goals with unsurpassed efficiency.

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Integration

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Information Management

Integration on the scale that the Kosovo MACC dealt with required a new system for information management. To coordinate the survey teams and mine awareness groups within the multiple NGOs carrying out the actual clearing, the MACC had to process vast amounts of raw data and then distribute useful information to people in the field in a timely manner. This would be a daunting task anywhere, but in the decimated country of Kosovo, it could have been a nightmare. Luckily, the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) stepped in with their newly developed Information Management System for Mine Action (IMMS). IMMS provides the entire mine action community with a standardized repository for data. Everyone participating in a mine action project—survey takers, deminers, and those involved with mine awareness and victim assistance—gather the same statistics from every area within the work zone and submit them to the IMMS database. Using this standardized data, IMMS allows coordinators to dramatically increase their efficiency. Managers can analyze data, view graphs and charts of all data, plot geographic maps of mine fields, keep track of all mine action activities, and view compilations of any statistics they wish, all within the same system. “It enabled us to collate and analyze a massive amount of data in a very short period of time and allowed the hands-on management of clearance and mine awareness activities,” Mr. Flanagan explained.

In Kosovo, the MACC had to take care not to repeat activities already completed by KFOR during their own military demining activities. KFOR conducted surveys to locate mined areas and to determine the accuracy of other reports; both activities that the MACC itself might otherwise have needed to do. Fortunately, KFOR agreed to use the IMMS database, thus allowing all of their mine action-related data to be compiled along with the MACCs. To ensure rapid distribution of this processed information within Kosovo, the MACC established regular updated satellite feeds throughout the country. Some NGOs also set up information centers for local populations, allowing civilians to access landmine and UXO data about their own community without traveling long distances.

Though invaluable, the IMMS system was not flawless. Working with the GICHD, the IMMS Information Technology Branch assisted in the development of a new version of the system. According to Mr. Flanagan, “version 2.2 is significantly better than the version 1.1—model initially deployed in Kosovo.” Most UN demining programs now use this easily improved version of IMMS.

Threat Assessment

When civilians see a truck burdenned with crates of landmines barrel past them, and then shot over empty dirt or empty clays in a nearby meadow, that meadow becomes a mine field. When something—anything—goes bang, the entire surrounding area becomes a mine field. Losing a limb or having a close friend killed when a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area, says Mr. Flanagan. In Kosovo, when a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area, says Mr. Flanagan. In Kosovo, when a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area, says Mr. Flanagan. In Kosovo, when a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area, says Mr. Flanagan. In Kosovo, when a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area, says Mr. Flanagan. In Kosovo, when a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area, says Mr. Flanagan. In Kosovo, when a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area, says Mr. Flanagan. When a rumor gets started about mines, people tend to exaggerate the size of the affected area. The slogan is another example of the MACCs efforts to get things done in the most efficient way possible, even if they had to abandon some standard practices. Many demining practitioners feel that manual demining is the safest, fastest, and most dependable method of clearing mine fields. With that only a random piece of UXO that exploded in the field, dangerous but not requiring the commitment of a full-scale demining contingent. Previously, it didn’t matter in humanitarian demining, because every reported mine field got the same scrutiny at its toe, leaving deminers to discover that sometimes the mines they’d been hunting never actually existed. Ghost mine fields drained resources just as fast as the real thing. At first, ghost mine fields posed a real problem to the MACCs goals. The Kosovo MACC needed a way to quickly confirm or dismiss reported mine fields to help them distribute assets in the most efficient manner possible. Instead of a cookie-cutter mentality (using the same solution for every problem), they customized their approach depending on the situation. Surveys have always been a necessary component of any demining program, and the Kosovo program was no different. Level One surveys helped the MACCs Quantitative Analysis Officer had to approve every deviation from SOPs, “and would not do so if there was any question about the safety or applicability of the action.”

Quality Management

Considering the compromises made for the sake of speed and efficiency, the Kosovo MACC put special emphasis on their quality assurance program. The MACC designed the program to ensure that all areas declared safe were in fact cleared to the appropriate standards. Only through such a program could the MACC maintain the high level that the MACC deemed full-scale deployment of forces unnecessary. Determining the mine density and ensuring an efficient distribution of assets on a regular schedule, focusing on specific, well-defined areas during each visit. QA teams had two goals: make sure demining teams operated safely to prevent their own injuries, and make sure they operated thoroughly to prevent civilian injuries after clearance was concluded. The QA teams achieved both goals by ensuring that each clearance area met or exceeded the accepted norm of cleared area. QA teams acted as “community constables, not riot police.” Their job was to identify problems and the Kosovo MACC

Mine Clearance

Clearance operations are the heart of any Mine Action operation. Removing a landmine from the ground is the only way to prevent it from ever claiming a victim. In Kosovo, the MACC had to contend with mines laid by three different factions: the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the Serbian Special Police (MUP), and the Vojska Jugoslovcija (VJ). The VJ provided the MACC with 620 mine field records of varying accuracy and comprehensiveness. Says Mr. Flanagan, "the maps provided by the VJ proved invaluable as a guide for determining the scope and the accuracy of each mine clearance task." When used in conjunction with all other information sources, the maps allowed the MACC to get a fairly accurate idea of where mines might be in any.Discernible patterns in VJ mine fields also greatly assisted demining operations, since the VJ had planted the vast majority of the mines found by the MACC.

The MUP specialized in laying small numbers of unmarked mines throughout villages and around essential infrastructure elements. These stray mines proved particularly troublesome as their dangerous positioning but low density made their removal both necessary and arduous. The MACC lacked the resources and equipment to properly move the large numbers of UXO that lay in the VJ's path. The MACC and MUP were thus forced to reassess their approach to dealing with these problematic mines. The MACC was not about to turn down any work, so the agency developed a special clearance technique that involved working with the Vojska Jugoslovcija (VJ). The VJ provided the MACC with 620 mine field records of varying accuracy and comprehensiveness. Says Mr. Flanagan, "the maps provided by the VJ proved invaluable as a guide for determining the scope and the accuracy of each mine clearance task." When used in conjunction with all other information sources, the maps allowed the MACC to get a fairly accurate idea of where mines might be in any. Discernible patterns in VJ mine fields also greatly assisted demining operations, since the VJ had planted the vast majority of the mines found by the MACC.

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and inefficient. Again, experienced deminers could sometimes detect pat­
terns even without any records. This dem­
strates the remarkable level of experi­ence and competence displayed by some of the 
deminering organizations. These acts were
good.

The KLA reported clearing all mines they 
had laid during the war, and 
deminers in the field generally confirmed 
this claim. Only a few mine fields dis­
covered in Kosovo could be attributed to 
KLA activities. Though all data provided by 
combatants helped, the maps and infor­
omation given to the MACC men­tioned only 624 of the nearly 26,000 
mines suspected by civilians. This fact 
shows the importance of the MACC’s 
own surveys in determining the severity 
of each district’s landmine problem. 
Sometimes soldiers have better things to 
do than mark mine field maps as accu­
rately as possible.

Despite maps with mines provided by 
each faction, the demining groups 
working under the MACC neutralized 
thousands of landmines in Kosovo. 
By the end of the year, 40 percent of the 
mine fields they cleared contained danger­
ous devices. This total is a significant 
achievement, given the scale of the 
landmine problem in Kosovo. The deminers 
were able to clear mines efficiently and 
proactively, using the information they 
collected from local residents to guide 
their operations.

Mine Awareness

While deminers surveyed and cleared 
towns and surrounding areas of 
landmines and UXO, other organizations 
conducted mine awareness campaigns, 
informing civilians of the dangers posed 
by landmines. These efforts were 
integrated with the work of MACC’s 
war-orno men. Civil­

deminers are still unaware of the dangers posed by landmines or UXO. The MACC’s primary victim assistance goal was to 
rehabilitate landmines found in northern Kosovo, all with the intent of changing risky behaviors to prevent unnecessary casualties.

The MACC collaborated with a variety of 
organizations to achieve this goal. They 
partnered with local NGOs, as well as interna­tional NGOs and governmental agencies, to 
implement the program with utmost efficiency. The MACC’s approach to mine clearance in Kosovo was innovative and 
comprehensive, combining the efforts of 
the Kosovo police, the Kosovo army, and 
the Kosovo movement’s volunteer 
deminers. The MACC designed two 
mine awareness programs for Kosovo: the 
Safer Village concept and the Child-to-Child 
program. Each program attacked the 
mine awareness problem from a different 
angle, but their overriding goal was the 
same: educate civilians (especially 
children) to avoid preventable deaths due 
to landmines.

Victim Assistance

The MACC conducted a detailed 
study of the landmine/UXO survivors in 
Kosovo to identify their needs and 
determine the best way to 
assist them. The study revealed that 
many survivors were in urgent need of 
medical and psychological 
assistance. The MACC designed two 
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Victim Assistance

A number of organizations worked 
with the MACC to provide 
assistance to landmine/UXO 
survivors. These organizations included 
the International Committee of the 
Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations 
High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 
and the Kosovo government. The ICRC 
provided financial support and technical 
assistance to the MACC. The UNHCR 
offered training and resources to 
help the MACC improve its 
capacity to identify and 
remove landmines. The Kosovo 
government provided political support 
and legal framework for the 
MACC’s operations.

Victim Assistance

The Kosovo MACC had a 
degrees of freedom in the 
realm of victim 
assistance. They were able to 
provide immediate and 
continued support to 
landmine/UXO survivors. The 
MACC also worked closely with 
local NGOs and governmental 
agencies to ensure that 
assistance was 
delivered efficiently and 
effectively. The 
MACC’s efforts were 
recognized by 
international 
organizations, 
including the ICRC and the 
United Nations. The 
MACC’s work was 
acknowledged as a 
significant 
contribution to the 
process of 
rehabilitation and 
reintegration of 
landmines/UXO 
survivors.
Future of Mine Action

Leads Learned and the Future of Mine Action

Though the circumstances surrounding the MACC’s implementation were rather unique, some of the lessons learned in Kosovo are applicable to future MAPs. Mr. Flanagan informed me that the overall structure of the Kosovo MACC is being imitated in Lebanon and Ethiopia, since “there are certain principles that should be applied wherever possible.” However, he stressed that the most important lesson from Kosovo is that there is no template solution in mine action. The most effective tactic used by the MACC was the design and implementation of a “Kosovo solution to the Kosovo problem.” Integration and effective information management allowed the complete customization of the MACC-led programs, the flexibility of which led in turn to unmatched speed, efficiency, safety, and success throughout the operation.

Mine action is often presented as an impossible problem. We’ve all heard that there are billions of landmines covering entire continents, completely eliminating populations, and that their removal may very well take till the end of time. Yes, I’m exaggerating, but my hyperbole is only slightly inflated when compared to the numbers frequently reported by advocacy groups: numbers that get frequent exposure in the press, accuracy be damned. Mr. Flanagan chooses to look at the land mine problem from a much different, much more optimistic and practical outlook. “I firmly believe that the problem of mine contamination can be rapidly brought under control in the vast majority of affected countries using existing technologies and techniques if each program is properly managed and implemented. An integrated approach is critical,” he declared. Obviously, he bases this statement on the recent success of the Kosovo MACC, but the wisdom to that approach cannot be denied.

Mr. Flanagan is not an overly optimistic dreamer when it comes to mine action though, either. He sees a very small window of opportunity open to the demining world right now, a window that may slam shut unless the HD community can come up with a string of successes now. If other projects are not wrapped up quickly and successfully, “then there is a strong possibility that donors will become disillusioned and in the topic will wane,” he prophesies.

With world attention currently focused on Afghanistan and the landmine situation there, the stage is set for a flurry of demining activities throughout the world. Flush with his recent, hard-earned success, Mr. Flanagan manages to see a light at the end of the demining tunnel, much nearer than many others in the field would suspect. “If all the resources that are currently being frenzied away through disinterest, inefficient or otherwise wasteful projects were brought to bear at a pace of sustained effort, the problem—essentially that of clearing the vast majority of landmines—might possibly be解决 within a decade or two,” he declares. Here’s hoping that all other MAPs throughout the world can achieve the same success that Mr. Flanagan and the Kosovo MACC have, because only then will the world enjoy the reality of Mr. Flanagan’s inspiring ten-year vision: a world safe from the impact of landmines.