

Behind the Scenes of Mine Action

Mine Action work involves numerous dangers and risks. Yet the field of Mine Action and the stark beginnings of a mine action center often beget warm bonds. Stories from men involved in demining show what life is like handling munitions, and setting up and running mine programs.

By Mary Ruberry, MAIC

Introduction

"Because they were shooting at our building, we decided to have our coffee on the floor. It was very good coffee, and they were still shooting at us, so we decided to have another cup." Thomas Bollinger of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) relayed his mine action story

blithely, illustrating a fairly typical attitude of the rare breed of men who establish and run mine action centers around the world. Mine action workers aren't looking for danger, but are undeniably engaged in a very dangerous line of work. As the stories of these men often show, maintaining a sense of humor has served them well in facing stress and fatigue.

Gathering stories from the field has resulted in a compilation of absurd, hilarious, stressful, horrifying, heart-wrenching and noble ac-

counts that allow a glimpse into the everyday tasks of a profession in which death maintains a specter of possibility. Formal training to prepare for a career in mine action and demining exists primarily through military experience. Almost all the gentlemen who contributed to this article have a military background, with the exception of Hendrik Ehlers of MgM. (Stiftung Menschen gegen Minen e.V., "The Charity of People against Landmines"). Nevertheless, as Paddy Blagden of GICHD points out, military mine field "breaching" is far afield from humanitarian demining. In the last twelve years since humanitarian demining officially began in Afghanistan, many lessons have been learned the hard way, and the experiences of mine action pioneers have resulted in a new set of standards that provide a foundation for the future.

Cowboys and Heroes

"Someone just had to get in there and rescue him." John Kirby of the Ocean Group (known by most as Jabba) describes his experience saving an 81-year old man from a mine field in Mukumbura, Zimbabwe. "He had lost four litres of blood by the time we got him to Karanda Hospital." With 20 years of experience in bomb disposal and mine clearance, John Kirby's act of risking his life to save another's is not out of character, but part of his line of work.

The term "cowboy" has been coined in reference to wild and reckless ways, and has subsequently been applied to mine action professionals for some of their "larger-than-life" experiences. Imagining Hendrik Ehlers in his tank on his novice

demining run in Angola does conjure cowboy-like images. "So, with my life-long friend, Hans Georg Kruessen, we took off for Angola where we were going to drive decommissioned, ex-East German army tanks into mine belts. We knew nothing about landmines until we found ourselves surrounded by ten thousand TM-57s."

Ehlers said that he is not really a cowboy because he has a technical and managerial background. Yet in the mid 1990s he founded a club called the Landmine Cowboys. "You had to be somebody to be a Cowboy." Apparently the 30 badges that were distributed are now considered collectors items. About the cowboy image, Blagden commented, "Actually they're not cowboys because cowboys take a lot of risks. Mine clearers take no risks they can avoid." However, Ehlers points out, "No sane person would voluntarily go to find out what the borders of a mine field are."

Starting From Scratch

Some Place to Work

"MACs are a positive influence on humanitarian mine action, and I take my hat off in salute to all those people working in them throughout the world." Willie Lawrence's tribute to MACs is well-founded in light of the dramatic challenges encountered setting one up in a post-conflict situation. As Paddy Blagden says, "Life is not always easy when you start a demining center. What people don't realize when they say 'I'm surprised that you didn't set things up quicker' is how infernally difficult it was to set up anything with the complete lack of power, of sanitation, of any amenity and it was a battle looking out for yourself and making sure you were fed and alive." In Bosnia, "We were ready to go. We just needed someplace to put our tiny bottoms, preferably with little things like

electricity and sanitation if you could possibly manage it. And, boy, a telephone would really be fun. But this didn't happen that way."

J.J. van der Merwe of the U.N.'s Office for Project Services describes setting up the Bosnia MAC in 1996: "You arrive in a country, there is nothing. The whole city was bombed out. And then you have to find a premises, you have to set up your office, you have to negotiate your lease agreement, you have to buy the furniture, and hire staff, and it all has to be done in the U.N.'s way, and of course we were unfamiliar with the U.N."

After being offered a bombed-out "university building" to house the MAC, the Bosnia team ended up building the office themselves out of "corrugated" containers, rubber-like containers used for shipping. As van der Merwe describes, "These are containers that have been turned into offices. Some of them are collapsible so you can actually take out some of the panels, and you can put two together and then you can have a bigger office. For the database, I think we put together something like eight containers. You took out all the sides. You would just use the roof and the floor and the structure, and you would bolt them together. [W]e physically drove the crane and were working as labor just to put this together. If you wanted this to be done, then sometimes you have to roll up your sleeves and get out there and make it work."

Some Way to Communicate

According to Blagden, maintaining an effective communication system can be tricky even when basic needs are met, such as in Bosnia. "The only thing was that we had to make our own electricity which wasn't too hard because we had a little generator at the back. A big water tank over us provided us with the water we needed for the washing facilities and the toilet. But we still lacked a telephone. So they strung us up a single line [that] was strung across what had been a fairly large area between two barrack buildings, the Marshall Tito Barracks in Sarajevo. But of course every time it snowed the poor old cable gave out or it shorted or whatever it was."

Sometimes Blagden had to travel to



communicate. In Kuwait, "The nearest telephone was six miles away." And in Mozambique, "It was down 6 flights of stairs and then half a mile across a few streets and then eleven flights of stairs up to the building's top which was alright except that was how we sent faxes and used the telephone." While in Angola, Blagden "used to have to queue up every evening for the one telephone line that went out from the camp."

Some Time to Relax

MAC workers also put in long days. In Kuwait, Paddy Blagden's staff worked "about 16 hours per day, seven days per week." J.J. van der Merwe explains, "When you're setting up a mine action program, there's not much time to take off for [recreation]. You're basically working seven days a week, I don't want to exaggerate, but up to 18 hours a day."

As van der Merwe notes, "this was pre-international standards. You would write the guidelines yourselves, you would develop the database. And then there would be, according to the information you had at that stage, the design of the program, the different mixes of demining assets and things that you needed because you would have to prepare or issue a plan on how to address

this problem very soon because again you are reliant on donor funding, and if you don't do it quickly enough, the donors might go somewhere else."

Van der Merwe recounted the endless tasks associated with constantly redrafting budgets and organizing information. "We had 18,000 records which the former warring factions gave us of mined areas. These 18,000 records had to be entered into the database. And there are so many other things like normal administrative things that you have to catch up before you can actually say 'now I'm ahead' and 'now I can sit back and just go on.'"

Military Training and Fear

"I wasn't afraid to go back and continue the work," J.J. van der Merwe told me after sharing his own near-death experience that took place twenty years ago in Namibia (the former South West Africa). When a 13 kilo British Mark 7 sent its cast-iron fuze through the belly of the mine-protected vehicle he rode in, van der Merwe was lucky to escape with his life. "I can just remember looking down and—you have to wear a safety belt—and I could remember seeing the sign to release the buckle. I pressed it and jumped

Will it go bang? Paddy Blagden dropping a BLU118 (Rockeye) body onto a steel plate to estimate operating threshold of nose fuze. Don't worry—rear fuze was removed. c/o Paddy Blagden



A morale boosting toga party in Pursat, Cambodia enjoyed by John Kirby and other mine action workers. c/o John Kirby

outside and the other troops were on me to put the fire out."

The mine fuze penetrated the vehicle's hull and fuel tank, and gasoline was sucked into the cab. The three men sitting around van der Merwe died in the incident, but he jumped quickly out of the vehicle and resumed command directing his troops to prepare for an expected ambush. The ambush didn't come, but fortunately men at the base saw the explosion and sent a rescue helicopter. "I lay in the hospital for a day and a half for them to stabilize me before I was Medivaced back to Pretoria." He then spent three months in intensive care recovering from 2nd and 3rd degree burn wounds.

Was van der Merwe's response of getting right back to what needed to be done—though severely injured—a result of his military training? "It probably could be soldier training, conditioning. According to a psychiatrist who saw me afterwards, the fact that I was fully conscious, still working, trying to organize the troops and stuff like that, was part of the reason why I never had any nightmares. I was very fortunate. Even til today I don't wake up at night and sit up with a nightmare."

Regarding his military foundation, Paddy Blagden says, "It serves you well because it makes you fairly tough. And obviously you're used to making decisions and you're used to looking after yourself. What kicks in could be perhaps a sense of survival. What you have to do becomes elementally clear. Whether that's military training or not, I don't know. All I know is that in my case and in several other people's cases that I know of, that's how it happens."

Daniel Eriksson of the Kosovo Mine Action Center said that his "only really scary moment" was the first time he demined a *real* mine. Then he "was scared and wondered 'what am I doing here?'" He says he was frightened only by what was going on in his mind.

Willie Lawrence's experience with terror was very real and staring him in the face. Now with MineTech, Lawrence was 18 when he saw two friends ripped apart by a bomb in Northern Ireland. "Also frightening was looking at John

Spriggs' bomb-blasted face a few moments after the detonation and realizing that there was virtually nothing I could do to make things any easier for him. But this incident has helped me to remember throughout the years of how awful these accidents are, and I have gained immensely from the experience. Many years after this event, I was drafted to our training school, and I found that the only thing we couldn't teach our students was how it *really* feels to be part of something like that."

Other Dangers

Working in mine fields presents an ever-real danger for deminers. The environment in which mine action takes place can also pose significant risks as Phil Paterson of the Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (MACA) explains: "In general, mine action often takes place in areas of unresolved conflict, which often results in deminers getting caught in the crossfire or in random shelling. The same applies to hijacking and kidnapping. Another general adrenalin producer is flying. Relief managers and demining managers are often flying several times a week in poorly maintained planes running on semi-contaminated fuel into airstrips that a motocross racer would have difficulty with. Accidents are common, and often life-threatening. I have lost track of the number of airplane incidents I have been caught in, from Africa to the Arctic to Afghanistan. But I dream about them at night, and I remember them all together every time I sit through a take-off or landing."

Alan Tadd was sent by his company, ThorSec UK Ltd., to train mine detection dogs in Mozambique. Last August, he had only been in the country twenty-one days when the fortified house where he was staying was broken into by an armed gang. The gang tied up Tadd and his comrade, Daniel. "In broken English the gang leader pushed the pistol at us [demanding] 'Where is the money?'" and threatening to kill us." The gang ransacked the house taking money and other valuables.

"[W]e knew that having seen the gangs' face[s], the situation was extremely

grave." Tadd and Daniel "heard the gang go through the kitchen door, which effectively put them outside the house, presumably, to load up all our property. This was our chance and Daniel quickly released himself completely and helped me to remove the ropes around my ankles. Scrambling to our feet we knew that our only option was to barricade ourselves into a room and fortunately we were next to the ideal location, a small room containing two chest freezers."

"Daniel moved into the room ahead of me and as I turned to close the door I saw one of the gang just three meters behind me; he had returned so quietly we were lucky to have moved when we did! I pushed one then the second freezer against the door, and we both took cover on the floor out of [the] line of fire from the door and exterior window. We heard the car engine start and they drove off. Discussing it afterwards, we are both convinced that the man had come back into the house to kill us."

Tragedies

As Willie Lawrence says, "We should all be glad that most mine action workers never see a mine accident. Long may that situation continue!" Yet among the seasoned ranks of mine action, many tragic stories do abound. Hendrik Ehlers tells a tale of a comrade's loss in Angola with a bittersweet end. "[I]n 1993 I took a tank into swampy ground. When I drove in there, it was muddy" and a friend came over to clear the mud off the tank so Ehlers could see. His co-pilot named Jesus climbed into the tank, lit a cigarette, and "five seconds later" an explosion "came through the opening where the cannon had been." Jesus was blown apart but "with all the shrapnel [Ehlers] didn't have a scratch."

Ehlers experienced a "low" after the incident that brought on a recurrence of malaria. Suffering from "survivor syndrome," he was sick and racked with guilt. Ehlers says that one explanation for escaping unscathed while the friend sitting next to him was killed is that "the Lord took [him] out for a second and then put [him] back." As a result of the accident, Ehlers feels he "has a mission"

and has stayed with his demining work.

Some months later, Ehlers and his team found Jesus' son "hiding out in bushes" hoping to escape being conscripted. The group hired the man on the spot and he has since worked for MgM in Angola. "It was the least we could do."

Paddy Blagden describes his "unhappiest moment" when a friend of his was "blown up." "I wasn't with him because I was the boss and was doing all the reconnaissance. I heard on the radio that there'd been an accident. So needless to say I drove like a fiend down to where the accident occurred. But he was dead. Most of him was in one piece. But there were a lot of bits and pieces of him lying around that needed to be buried, only small bits mostly. But I couldn't bring people back in to work in the same area. Everybody else had gone home. So I stayed behind and cleared up everything I found and buried it. I definitely mourned for him. Because as a manager, one always says, 'well, was it my fault he was killed?'"

The Unexpected

In December of 1992, in a small community in Angola, Ehlers first helped deliver a baby. The hospital was being rebuilt, so MgM's paramedic was assisting with the birth. Because the young mother had great difficulty delivering, the paramedic decided to perform a caesarian. "When the baby came out, it was dead, and the paramedic fought for the life of the mother." Ehlers felt frustrated by his inability to be of help, so the paramedic asked him to resuscitate the baby "just to keep busy." He "did respiration on the baby over and over," but there was no sign of life. Finally, there was a slight movement, and the baby started to breathe. Both the mother and baby were fine. According to Ehlers, "There are several little kids out there who are now called 'Emee-gee-eme' or Enrique, or Jorge."

Willie Lawrence described an unexpected response to clearance teams from

a local in Mostar, Bosnia. The teams "had been at work for some weeks in the area and were cutting the vegetation away from the ground so that they could bring their metal detectors to find any mines in the area. While I was there, an old lady was grazing her goats on the land some distance in front of the deminers, where there were supposedly antipersonnel mines sown. I watched her walk towards a deminer. As she came into the periphery of his vision, he stopped work and began to shout towards her. This little old lady marched right up to him and started to beat him with her stick. She was not pleased that he and his colleagues were destroying the food that God put on that area for her goats!"

Comradery

"If we are on this earth for anything, it is to help each other and all the people [who] have helped and supported me will remain in my mind," reflects Lawrence about his life in mine action. Phil Paterson says, "Mine action contains a fellowship of like-minded and dedicated people. It is a pleasure to work in this group, and to know that I have long-term friendships from mine action."

As van der Merwe highlights, "You have to find humor in any kind of situation." Blagden agrees. To offset the fact that, "Actual mine clearance itself is dull," he has enjoyed "the jokes and the private things that we made for ourselves. Some of the jokes that we had were appallingly funny and in fact one chap came into our organization once, and we were always falling about with laughter, and he said 'how can you be laughing so much when you're demining?' So I said, well, you know, either you're laughing or you're crying, and you can do a lot of both, but it's best to laugh a bit."

Comradery becomes especially important in a setting where language is a barrier for relating to locals. As van der Merwe describes, "You quickly build up

a group of friends and have like a tradition. In the MAC in Bosnia, very quickly we set up a tradition where on Sunday evenings we would go to initially the five and later it became more, to each others' house and that person [who] occupied that apartment was then responsible for cooking the dinner on that Sunday evening."

Moving Forward

As mine action heads into what van der Merwe calls the "the third phase" (Kuwait, post-Kuwait and since UNMAS), he believes "we are at a juncture where we can really go forward. We are basically now in the next cycle where the international standards have been revised and we now have a very good foundation." To Blagden, moving mine action forward, "means that all the experience that we've been gaining over the years is being slowly built into the future. And we've got to do it in a more systematic way otherwise all the lessons we've learned we'll have to re-learn them."

Clearing mines and running MACs is never a solo endeavor. The future of mine action will be built on the lessons learned of what Phil Paterson calls, "a small family of people who take their jobs seriously and are highly professional." Working towards a common goal, mine action colleagues have pulled together under generally unfavorable conditions to create mine programs out of dust and generate a kind of brotherhood. As Lawrence puts it, "If demining is anything, it is teamwork and I have always felt that I am part of something good—perhaps even noble." ■

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