

The Sapper

Jose Antonio, a sapper working on demining operations in Nicaragua, explains the daily requirements of the work he does, which he explains is both demanding and rewarding.

by Juan Carlos Ruan,
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Since the early 1990s, the Organization of American States (OAS) has been executing a Demining Assistance program in Central America. The program is a responsibility of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD) of the General Secretariat of the OAS and the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB). While the OAS provides overall coordination, fundraising and direction of the program, the IADB functions as the operational, technical component. The IADB provides a team of international supervisors and military trainers that comprise the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America (MARMINCA). Since its origins in the early 1990s, the program has gradually evolved in size and complexity. Today, a coalition of financial donor nations and countries contributing personnel provide critical support to the four Central American beneficiary countries (Costa

Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua). The program is intended to assist the Central American nations in destroying all landmines found within their national territories.

The true heroes of the demining program are the sappers themselves, members of their countries' militaries who risk their lives and limbs for the well being of their communities. Jose Antonio Arquin Hernandez, from the Nicaraguan army, is one of Nicaragua's heroes. He has been working in demining for five years and is currently chief of a demining squad working on two site objectives in Nicaragua: Avisinio and Pita del Carmen.

He describes the grueling day of a sapper in great detail. Their day begins at 4:50 a.m. with physical training and daily morning tasks. Before departing to the objective in the field, which may be an hour drive from Managua, they execute a thorough review of their equipment, including testing the mine detectors and ensuring that they have all the appropriate safety equipment that they wear while working. This sapper's uni-

form, he explains, is often one of the most treacherous things about the job. When they are in the field, the intensity of the sun causes moments where they feel suffocated and claustrophobic. This is one of the reasons why deminers work in shifts of one hour. Once they have reached the objective, they are briefed by an officer and communicate with the command post to ensure the availability of safety equipment and personnel such as doctors, ambulances and helicopters. If any of these are missing the operation is delayed until they become available.

Jose Antonio explains that when he began working as a sapper there was a real sense of fear. This fear was not only his own but encompassed his family as well. They begged him to find a job that entailed less danger. However, with the passage of time, and with his reassurance to his family of the care they take when working, his family's concerns, as well as his own, subsided significantly. Nevertheless, he remains quite aware of the danger involved in demining and repeats what he has been taught during his training: "You must respect the landmines."

As Chief of his demining squad, Jose Antonio has many leadership qualities that are necessary to successfully execute the daily activities of landmine removal.

One of these qualities is his ability to command a team within the field as well as away from the field. Another quality is his psychological strength. As he explains, it takes a lot of psychological preparation to ensure that the stress from his duties does not become an obstacle to his job, which demands constant concentration.

When asked if he ever felt fear while working, Jose Antonio replied that he constantly feels fear. One of the moments when he was most afraid from his work was after Hurricane Mitch when his team was working on the southern border of Nicaragua with Costa Rica next to the San Juan River. Due to the heavy rainfall caused by Hurricane Mitch, the river had swelled to twice its size. The currents had dislodged mines from their original locations, making them difficult to locate. In addition, sand had been dragged on top of the mines, causing the mines to be buried deeply. This became an obstacle to the demining program in the area as well as an increased risk factor of the operations.

In his five years working in demining, Jose Antonio has witnessed a small number of accidents. The most recent one he witnessed was at the base of a hydroelectric tower in Jinotega, Nicaragua. The accident occurred at 10:00 in the morning when two demining platoons were working at the appropriate safety distance from each other. At the time, Jose Antonio was in charge of detecting the mines. Suddenly he saw and heard an explosion occur within the other platoon. Both

teams were called back from the mine field. The Chief of Squad of the other platoon had accidentally detonated a landmine while attempting to mark the area where an object was detected. Jose Antonio said that you could feel his pain. They withdrew the injured Chief of Squad, Francisco Hernandez, from the field and carried him to the ambulance that transported him to the medical facilities where he was treated. It took 45 minutes for them to transport him to the medical facilities where, due to the severity of the injury, they were forced to amputate his leg. This, Jose Antonio explains, is not something that is ever forgotten. It remains with you for the rest of your life.

Apart from the treacherous conditions they work in and the constant presence of danger, Jose Antonio is extremely proud of working in this truly humanitarian program. It is an honor, he adds, to return land to the people of Nicaragua and to be able to assist in the development of his country. ■

*All photos courtesy of MAIC.

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(L-R) MARMINCA deminers operating in the Third front, Juigalpa, Nicaragua.



(L-R) MARMINCA sappers complete training exercises in Nicaragua.