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An Interview With Colin King

Colin King is a graduate of Sandhurst. He served 14 years in the British Army, gaining extensive knowledge of explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), and served both as an instructor at the British EOD School and as the sole EOD analyst for the Ministry of Defense for six years. He founded an EOD consultancy company, which conducts assessments, training and operational trials worldwide. He is also the editor of Jane’s Mines and Mine Clearance.

by Margaret Busé, Editor

Margaret Busé (MB): Can you tell me about training the Afghan deminers?

Colin King (CK): I think it was really the first major UN demining initiative. The deminers were all mujahideen, and they were sent to one of two training centers. I led one of two teams based in Quetta, which was just on the border in Pakistan in the southern desert region; then there was another center in Peshawar to the north. Looking back, the program was very basic. It was totally focused on training people to remove mines, UXO and booby traps. There was really no attention to the other aspects of mine action—and none of the support functions or quality assurance; none of that was really thought about in those days.

MB: Who did your assessments when you went in?

CK: This program was purely about training deminers for mine and UXO clearance. There was little thought at that time as to which areas they would be going into, prioritizing tasks or what equipment they would use. They were basically sent in with a bag of hand tools, a kid’s $10 Radio Shack metal detector and not much else.

MB: When did you start your demining efforts?

CK: My first experience with mines was the Falklands. The actual Falklands war was in 1982, and I went there two years later. Then two years after that, I commanded all bomb disposal operations on the island, including responsibility for the minefields. We basically tried to keep the minefields under control by going after mines that had moved, or were in danger of moving, and responding to emergency calls on mines and other UXO.

MB: You’re talking from 1984 to 2003, almost 20 years. Can you tell me how mine action has changed from where it was when you first started to where it is today?

CK: To me, one of the most obvious changes is the adoption of PPE [Personal Protective Equipment], which just wasn’t a prominent issue when I first started. It was available, but in the army, we mainly wore protective equipment for terrorist bomb disposal; we rarely bothered with it for anything to do with mines. We didn’t wear it at anytime during operations in the Falklands, and I didn’t use PPE for many years afterwards. It wasn’t really until my friend Paul Jefferson got severely injured in Kuwait that the issue was properly highlighted.

MB: PPE was not used for military clearance or humanitarian demining?

CK: It just wasn’t something that people recognized as a significant consideration in the early days. That changed, I think, as the casualties built up during the post-war clearance in the Gulf. Paul was the first major British casualty among the clearance teams, and that incident made a lot of people stop and think.

MB: Could you tell me about the accident?

CK: Paul was a very good friend of mine. He and I were in the army together and worked in the same unit of the EOD Regiment; we also handed over commands in the Falklands. I stayed in the army when Paul left and went to Kuwait, where he was by far the most highly qualified technical expert working there. He stepped on a mine and was severely injured; he lost a leg and was completely blinded. A few years later, I was an expert witness when he brought a court case against his employers; he claimed that they failed to provide adequate protective equipment—eye protection, in particular. It was absolutely true, but then to be fair, very few people bothered with any form of PPE at that time. He won the case, but regardless of the rights or wrongs, the fact was that it...
highlighted the issue from a common-sense point of view. Also from a legal perspective, it was now clear that employers could be held liable for injuries to their employees and needed to protect their employees adequately.

MB: Do you think there is more coherence between military and humanitarian demining than when you started back in the 1980s?

CK: Well it's strange how demining has evolved, because in the very early days it was the military who taught it, and it was all based on the military principles of minefield breaching. Humanitarian demining techniques didn't really exist in training, and then again sometimes you will see a person with absolutely no formal education that just has natural aptitude—no formal training, common sense and the ability to be innovative. What I think is very difficult is to screen out the right people before the training begins; you have to keep from being trained to people from a training program if they are unsuitable. I also think there is a significant difference between the qualities you are looking for in a deminer and an EOD technician. EOD demands lateral thinking and innovation; deminers often have to follow a repetitive routine, and the last thing you want is for them to start being innovative.

MB: How have you seen the tools that the deminers use evolve over the last 20 years?

CK: It all started with whatever military tools were available, still primarily the metal detector and the probe. In some cases, the probe would be the boundary, and there are still a lot of military units that favor using the boundary. What we have seen is the evolution of protective equipment, metal detectors, probes and other tools for cutting vegetation or searching mining sites, that have developed into better, more purpose-built equipment. For example, there's the initiative by Andy Smith to build tools that don't fragment because his research showed that so many deminers were injured by tools breaking up during an explosion.

MB: What do you think are some of the challenges of training deminers?

CK: I think even in the days of the Afghan program, you could recognize that some people had more aptitude than others. Some people were really scared by exploitable areas in the rapid closure of positions, and that's really what it is. Some people had no natural ability and that's not exactly ideal in work like this. Some people just don't have the ability to absorb the training, and then again sometimes you will see a person with absolutely no formal education that just has natural aptitude—no formal training, common sense and the ability to be innovative. What I think is very difficult is to screen out the right people before the training begins; you have to keep from being trained to people from a training program if they are unsuitable. I also think there is a significant difference between the qualities you are looking for in a deminer and an EOD technician. EOD demands lateral thinking and innovation; deminers often have to follow a repetitive routine, and the last thing you want is for them to start being innovative.

MB: Do you think there is a lot of demoralizing, really another thing that has changed over the last years is that mine action is no longer seen as a stand-alone activity. It has to be incorporated into an overall regional development plan. There are the major issues such as political support, funding, and training and funding. What you get down to the fundamental issues of understanding the problem. The better you understand it, the more focused and adapted your approach to the solution can be. That relates largely around survey, which is something else that has developed over the last 20 years—even though people don't necessarily agree on what it means. What I think is that it makes good sense to have a regional overview before you see the survey side is absolutely fundamental to mine action.

MB: Mine action is being refined constantly. Lessons are being learned and it's also being more focused, more surgical. It's also being better managed and there's better integration. And all of these trends seem to set to continue. The international flavor, the application of lessons from one region to another, the change in projects and the mixture of local and international players is making steady progress. In some cases, the people who are behind the curve, because most have no practical experience at all. I have to say that the SOF trainers I have seen have been consistently high-caliber people who are clearly dedicated to their work, but they are sometimes put in an impossible position, faced with situations way outside their area of knowledge.

MB: I'm sure you've got a tremendous number of lessons learned in the amount of time you've been in the field. Where do you think demining will and should go in the next 10 years?

CK: It tends to happen when non-specialists, like U.S. SOF (Special Operations Forces) teams, are given basic instruction and then sent to train on a large scale. When the situation no longer fits the template and they need alternatives, they might not have the depth of knowledge or experience to fall back on. It's always risky to be without one step ahead of the people you're training. In some cases, the people they're training have actually been demining for some time, and it's the trainers who are behind the curve, because most have no practical experience at all. I have to say that the SOF trainers I have seen have been consistently high-caliber people who are clearly dedicated to their work, but they are sometimes put in an impossible position, faced with situations way outside their area of knowledge.

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