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First Person: Deminers' Stories

Personal stories open a unique world by revealing the challenging experiences in the life of a deminer. These stories are compiled from the CD *Landmines: Clearing the Way*, which showcases field experiences and explains how the U.S. government and the international community are working together to solve the landmine problem.

from *Landmines: Clearing the Way*, by Huntington Associates

Paul, Program Manager

I had been hired as a result of skills and training I had received from the British army, where I had learned about munitions and the importance of discipline, command and control. These skills proved to be critical for humanitarian mine clearance. I was sent to Angola to help train and establish HALO's first demining teams in Kuito. I then became location manager, supervising five teams comprising around 200 people. Since then, I have also served as the HALO program manager in Cambodia and Kosovo. Most recently, I have helped launch HALO's first office in the United States.

The key to successful demining is our investment in local staff. When HALO arrives in a war-torn area, we frequently find young men who have suffered through horrific conflict, have little self-esteem, think of themselves as victims and have no respect for human life. Through our training programs, we build their confidence and self-respect. We give them something to believe in, a sense of direction that helps make their lives worthwhile. On top of all this, we take an interest in them, provide clothing and pay a good salary. In many places where HALO works throughout the world, our deminers are the only local citizens earning a living. Therefore, they enjoy the respect of their peers.

In short, what we do for our deminers and the communities in which we work is almost as important as clearing mines. We provide hope, knowledge, training, skills and the means for them to reconstruct their lives.

Makmaktani Ali, Demining Driver

I am working as a demining driver in Abkhazia. I want to do something useful and to contribute to this community because the deminers came to my country to help us when we needed help. I am from Grozny, Chechnya. I was growing up and living there before the war. After graduation from high school, I was an economist. I became a banker. When the war came, it broke up life. I had no more job, so I started working with deminers in Chechnya. Within two and a half years, we have destroyed a lot of mines and UXO, primarily from agricultural land. This was land for growing wheat and rice and sugar beets. We could see the results of our mine clearance just after we finished. The farmers were cultivating and seeding those fields right away. When we were driving past those fields that used to be minefields, it was really very great.

When the second invasion came, we were not able to carry on with clearing mines, and that is when we started assisting civilian populations. We set up medical care points in each village where we had access. We got them potable water. There were so many injured people, and they were lacking medical supplies. We were helping them a lot.

Even when we were just driving along the roads, there were people injured by shells and landmines. We used to pick them up and drive them to the health care points, even some with their legs off. The war was going on. Under the bombardments, under shells and rockets, my life was in danger, but it is not just about my life. I was in my motherland, obliged to take risks. The representatives of the HALO Trust, ex-pats, were really putting their life in danger.

Tom Dibb from England was working with me. If he found a mine or UXO along the road, he used to demolish it right at the site. It was very dangerous. There were a lot of bomb blasts, submunitions, and once an airdropped bomb dropped down 150 meters away from us. We were lucky it didn't go off. Tom disposed of that rocket; it took a long, long time. It is because of Tom's example that I am now working in Abkhazia.

Moses Dube, Mine Detection Dog Program Supervisor

I work for Norwegian Peoples Aid. I am responsible for training our 25 dog handlers in Mozambique. Our program is going so well that we sent our mine detection dog teams to Bosnia and Kosovo to help the deminers in the Balkans. I am proud of this because we didn't have a good beginning with dogs.

In 1994, we got eight dogs from Norway, and the dogs were really good, but we were not used to dogs. Some of us did not like dogs. Normally, our forefathers just used dogs for hunting. When the mine detection dogs came, we asked the handlers to take care of the dog, to clean the dog, wash the dog with shampoo—this was something strange to our national dog handlers. That is why we had to send half of the dogs back. Even today there are not many families that keep dogs as pets in Mozambique.

After that, we decided to have an extended course for dog handlers lasting six months; in the first three months, we have to see if the guy likes the dog or not. If we see that the guy is likely to take a dog as a pet, then we go into the technicalities with them of using dogs in finding mines.

What would make our program better today? 25 more dogs!

Joel Murray, Senior Demining Program Manager

I am an American working for the RONCO Consulting Corporation in Mujadere, Kosovo. We were brought here on an emergency basis by the U.S. State Department and the United Nations to help clear mines and UXO resulting from the conflict between Serbs and Kosovars.

Mujadere was the scene of much fighting because the Serbs were based here while the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) up in the nearby hills used guerilla tactics to try to weaken and defeat them. The mine records we got show that the Serbs laid 600 mines—most of them tripwire-activated PMR3s—in a 20-square-kilometer area to protect themselves from the KLA.

I like my work as a deminer. We get a lot of support from the village, and it is great to see returning refugees get back to their houses. My biggest problem is keeping the children away. They are curious and want to see what our mine detection dogs are doing. Usually, every day at noon, they come after school, and we have to shoo them away because we don't want them to get hurt.

Captain Mello, International Supervisor

I am Captain Mello from Brazil, one of the donor countries supporting the Organization of American States (OAS) and humanitarian demining in Central America. I belong to a team of international supervisors who have come to Nicaragua from different countries in Latin America for one year. Our assignment is to oversee the work of the Nicaraguan army, which is doing the demining. We check safety rules, assure quality clearance and guarantee transparency.

We have had a perfect safety record except for one small incident that happened to me. A

grenade half hidden under a rock went off while we were checking a piece of UXO, and a fragment went into my ankle. After four days of rest, I was back at work again, but this experience has made me more careful than before.

All the international supervisors agree that this one-year assignment is valuable. We are helping to clear mines for local people, and we are learning a lot about each other. Before, we sometimes saw each other's countries in a bad light. Through this program we got to know each other and to respect each other. For example, I am the only one speaking Portuguese, and sometimes they have to translate for me, but they say they don't mind.

It is interesting to see the different groups doing demining in Central America. In Nicaragua it is the army, in Guatemala it is the volunteer firemen, in Costa Rica it is the public security police, and in El Salvador, the ambulance corps plays the major part. Deminers in all these groups work year by year; there is very little turnover.

What is the secret of our success? Everyone shares a sense of discipline and camaraderie. We are used to taking orders and to following rules. We like assignments like this, and when I have the opportunity, I will apply to come again.

Leng Soren, Country Operations Manager

I am the country operations manager for the HALO Trust demining program in Cambodia. People ask me why I have this job when I can speak English and French and could work in Phnom Penh if I wanted to. I tell them that I work in mine clearance because I want to help Cambodia move into the 21st century. A nation cannot develop if one person from every family is an amputee! We have to clear the mines so that Cambodia can build its economy.

When I was a young, I worked in the French Embassy. This is where I learned my languages and also where I learned management skills. When the Khmer Rouge took over, I hid the fact that I was educated. I rubbed dirt into my fingernails, went to the countryside and pretended to be an imbecile. When I could not find food, I ate the bark from trees. Many of my family were killed. I survived. Now I want to help build a good future for my country. Cambodia is a beautiful country, and if all the mines are taken out, the people can return to their lands, cultivate their farms, and make Cambodia the way it was before the war.

Omajie, Team Leader

I learned to be a deminer when the Americans came to Mozambique. RONCO gave us four months' training; I went to it with my friend Orlando, who told me it would be good work and we would get good pay. Then we cleared mines in Mozambique. After the project was over, we had no work for awhile. We wanted to keep working to get mines out of the ground.

Norwegian Peoples Aid found out about us and asked if we would go to Angola to clear mines there, and we were happy to say yes. There are so many mined areas in Angola. We worked very hard to clear them. After Angola, we came to Europe to clear around Sarajevo, and now RONCO brought us here to clear UXO in Kosovo. Last winter was the first time I saw snow. It was so cold that there were many days we could not work. To make us think of Mozambique, we cooked African food with corn flour and different spices.

Some say clearing cluster bomb units (CBUs) is demining, but I say it is different from real demining; the CBUs are not underground like most mines, they lie on the top. You have to use your eyes and your detector. The secret of our work is concentration, concentration, concentration. Our team is one of the best. In Kosovo, people call us "the African experts come to help the Europeans." This is a good way to repay the Europeans who helped Mozambique.

Haben Solomon, Deminer in Training

I am 22 years old. I used to work in the Eritrean Commissioner's Consulate in Asmara, but I left to join the deminers. I want to work as a deminer because there are so many

mines and UXO around here. My family and friends are afraid. They ask, "Why are you doing this with your life?" and they say, "You are a crazy man." I am not like that. I am fully confident with this job's safety. I'll work as long as it takes. It is most important to clear mines, and I am doing this because I want to offer something for my people.

Mohamed Shohab Hakimi, Mine Detection Director and Dog Center

It is my belief that we should band together to remove the mines and UXO. We must end poverty and create a real and happy life, which is the right of all human beings. Our homeland Afghanistan is still, after 21 years of strife, littered with landmines and UXO, making it the world's largest mine-affected country among 74 others. Mines, the bearer of war, further lead poor Afghans toward misfortune by killing and indiscriminately maiming innocent civilians daily.

I work to ensure that those working in my demining operations get their proportionate incentives and privileges to compensate for their hard and risky tasks. Deminers are indeed playing with their lives to bring happiness and prosperity to others. The Holy Koran says, "Whoever killed a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and who saved the life of one, it shall be as if he saved the life of all mankind."

I beg to all to treat deminers in a positive manner. I recognize the very real dangers and remind you that the Holy Koran also says, "when the hour of death arrives, no one can delay it." It was a great misfortune that the Mine Dog Center (MDC) lost six of its personnel this year due to demining accidents. I emphasize repeatedly to my deminers that the safety and quality of their work is very important, and that their operation is to save the lives of others, but not at the cost of their own, indeed. I tell them that they must put up a fierce fight against the hidden enemies that are mines and UXO.

Profetica Cardoza, Field Operations Officer and EOD Specialist

I am from Mozambique. I was an officer in the Mozambican army, but before joining the army, I went to England to learn English. I attended the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, where I was being trained to be a British field officer. My training was interrupted when I returned home to fight in the war here.

When the Peace Accord was signed, I wanted to help clear all the mines in our country. I joined the HALO Trust as a team leader. The first minefield I helped clear was a tea plantation where we sometimes found 30 to 40 mines a day. Soon I was made a supervisor, then a demining instructor and an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) specialist, then a country operations manager. Since then, I have helped train team leaders in Angola, Mozambique and Eritrea. I believe that good leadership, discipline and management are the key components of successful humanitarian demining.

Mombi Bel, Demining Team Leader

I am a demining team leader working in Thinasangkriam School Village not far from Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia. Many people know me as an inventor because it was my idea to make cloth covers for the deminers' visors to keep them from being scratched and to make them last much longer.

We came to this village because it needs urgent help. Mines injured 12 people and a booby-trapped shell placed in the school killed two. Five cows were also killed. There are mines all over the village as well as in the fields.

The first part of my job is to help guarantee safety and to verify that cleared land is truly empty of mines. We use a checks and balances system. Every hour, I see that the section manager checks the work of the deminers in my group. Twice a day, I go over the same area to make absolutely sure that there is no metal left in it. I am trained in EOD, so when mines are found I am able to lay the charge that destroys them. I also help manage the whole demining site to make sure no man or machine is idle and no time is wasted. Careful planning is needed, and it makes for good results.

It makes me happy to work for a peaceful Cambodia, and I am earning money for a house that I will buy someday. My savings will be enough for a house probably in four years.

Shamel and Shamel, Deminers

We were civil engineers working in the coalmines. After the war, all coalmines were closed, and we really didn't have a job. Though we are rather old, we knew we would like to clear the landmines from the ground as soon as possible, and that is what we are doing. They call us "the old men" and say that because we are so careful, we are two of the best deminers in the Caucasus.

We just follow all the rules of safety, just like we followed the safety rules at our mines, and this way we keep our lives. We work for 50 minutes and we break for 10 minutes. When we find a mine, we are pleased with the work we have done because that is our contribution. It is one less death. That is how we can save other people's lives.

My son died a few months ago in the Gali region. He was in the front line, and I feel myself in the front line too. I feel that I can replace him in his duties so that I can just contribute and continue to work for peace. Why should just the young people take the risk? Shamel and I were the first to arrive for demining. We believe it is our duty to take risks for the prosperous future of Abkhazia.

Our advice to young deminers is to follow all the safety rules. Carry on working the way you are taught. Don't be in a hurry so that you can go back home with all your limbs.

Edmond, Chief Medic

I am Edmond, serving as a chief medic for mine casualties and other emergency injuries in Kosovo. I am 26 years old and am in my sixth year of medical studies at the Pristina University. At the same time as I am studying, I must work to support myself and my parents, who are retired.

My main task at this time is to train emergency first aid teams in trauma care and casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) techniques. CASEVAC is the immediate evacuation of casualties with no expectation of en-route care. Vehicles or aircraft are usually the best modes of transportation, but one disadvantage is that they are often not the best equipment for carrying a seriously wounded person. An ambulance would be far better but also far slower. I must make the decision which to use.

As part of our work, we conduct practice drills on getting a landmine victim safely out of a danger area into an ambulance or another vehicle. To do this, we actually tie up the leg of one of our teammates and go through the simulated procedure step-by-step, as if he had lost a limb. This kind of drill is essential if [the procedure] is to be successful if and when a real accident happens.

I began work with HALO in 1999, when accidents kept happening, like that of the two young patients who tore around the hallways of Pristina Hospital in wheelchairs. The boys, Adem Kelmendi, 13, and his cousin Atlen, nine, both lost their legs when they stepped on a mine not far from their house as they chased the family cow across a field the family presumed was safe. "The men had cut the hay in those fields," Atlen's mother said, "and the cows went there. We did not think there was a problem. We had just been back home for four days."

I like my work because deminers are preventing accidents from happening, and I am providing emergency medical treatment if casualties do occur to keep the injuries as minor as possible.

Daur Jerija, Mine Awareness Trainer and Former Deminer

My name is Daur Jerija. I was working as a deminer for about one year, and it happened exactly that 365th day of work. It seems that I just failed to follow some safety rules, so I detonated a mine. There is a saying that a deminer can only make a mistake once, but I think that I was lucky to lose just my hand. The deminer is taking the risk more than

anyone.

During the war with Georgia, we saw so many awful things. We lost a lot of close friends, relatives and brothers. This is life. I cannot say this is the best way, but I think it is not the worst case. I am happy with my prosthesis, and I've got another one with a hook so that I can work. I really gained a lot of friends through this unfortunate accident, and I learned more about the kind hearts of people.

Aslan Mintaev, Demining Supervisor

After two years in the army, I entered the university, the English department, and graduated in 1994, a few months before Russia's internal conflict would take place in my homeland.

At the end of the war in 1996, I was employed by ICRC Wat/San department, and in 1998, I joined the HALO Trust. I worked in Chechnya as a team leader, making sure that all my team followed safety rules and stuck to the HALO demining procedures. The HALO Trust activities were visibly progressing in my republic, which was of great help to the local community, but the situation around and inside Chechnya was getting tense with every month. As a result, at the end of October 1999 we stopped demining in Chechnya and focused mostly on delivering medicine to the hospitals and helping the local population.

As it got impossible to work in Chechnya, I was offered to go to Abkhazia to continue my job with the HALO Trust. After the winter stand-down, we started to do the survey in Abkhazia, and I worked as a survey officer, which was very informative for me, because I looked at the whole process from another point of view. Definitely, it was very useful to see various situations of the minefields inasmuch as it makes one work out quite a new approach to the planning of safe and effective demining.

Tracing back everything I have done while working with the HALO Trust, I always come to one sunny autumn day when I was driving by a once-upon-a-time minefield at Yandi junction in Chechnya, and saw the tractors plowing the ground about 17 hours after it had been cleared and was handed over to the chief of the local community. I was very proud that I put a little of me into the efforts of clearing that piece of ground and those efforts were not in vain.

Joao, Country Operations Manager

I am lucky. I have a wife and many children. I was a fourth-year medical student when the war became so heavy that I could not finish my studies. To support my family, I became a deminer in 1995.

I joined the HALO Trust to work as an EOD team member. HALO taught me leadership and management. Because of this, I became a demining supervisor and then the Huambo Province operations manager in 1997. The very next year, I was made country operations manager. I am now responsible for running all HALO operations in Angola, including training new deminers and deploying demining teams so that clearance goes as fast as possible.

Our country needs to rebuild itself after so many years of war. I am most interested in maintaining a safe and efficient mine clearance operation. I want to see that our local recruits have a chance to get the same leadership skills as I have from HALO. The pay is good. My friends call me a "wealthy African" as a result of my longtime work in humanitarian demining.

Lao Women, EOD Trainees

We are in nine weeks of training to become EOD specialists; the Americans are teaching us. We spent last week learning how to plot the location of UXO on maps using satellite coordinates so that everyone has the same reference points. Today's lessons were on how to lay the charge to destroy UXO in place and on building walls of sandbags so that debris does not fly off everywhere. We know we must pile the sandbags higher if there is a village nearby so that no one is hurt.

Our days of work are very long, but we do not worry, because our mothers are taking care of our babies. They are too old to do this kind of work and are proud of us. Women working as deminers are something new in our Buddhist culture. Our mothers value the money we earn because it is helping everyone in the family, and they know we will be safe if we follow the rules.

Another reason we like to become EOD specialists is to protect all the children in our country. They are warned not to play with UXO, but it is hard to stop them. They want to earn money by selling the metal for scrap. When we clear the UXO, they cannot get hurt anymore.

Don MacDonald, Program Manager and EOD Specialist

For many years, I served in the British Royal Air Force as a bomb disposal operator and weapons technician. In 1994, after I left the air force, I joined the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and was sent to northern Iraq, the Kurdish region, where MAG had set up a humanitarian mine action program.

There is a great deal of job satisfaction, and I have worked as a humanitarian deminer ever since. You feel you are actually doing some good when you are actively involved in clearing land in poverty-stricken areas for people to grow crops, collect water and build buildings. I learned Lao/Thai so I can communicate directly with the deminers I am working with.

What I most dislike about demining is that in the mine- and UXO-affected communities, there are always accidents involving mines and UXO. We are often required to assist in recovering accident victims, which is not a very pleasant task.

When I think of the most satisfying experiences I have had, one village in northern Laos in Xieng Khouang province comes to mind. It took us over three weeks to clear the UXO just lying on the surface of the ground. In that time, we got to know the villagers very well, and when the job was completed, they arranged a huge party for all of our team. It was not the case they could afford it either. It has also been satisfying to see the local teams we trained deal with situations competently and professionally.

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