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The K9 Demining Corps in Lebanon

Thanks to the Marshall Legacy Institute (MLI), dogs are playing a large role in the demining of Lebanon.

by Amy Eichenberg, Program Manager, K9 DC Campaign

Lebanon's Landmine Problem

Lebanon suffered 15 years of civil war from 1975–1990. Warring parties used landmines extensively, primarily to consolidate defensive positions along lines of demarcation. Unfortunately, many of the mined areas were neither marked nor recorded. Following the war, engineering units of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) began to execute reconnaissance operations to gather information about minefields and to conduct a program of mine clearance. Eliminating the landmine threat was a slow and hazardous process, as the LAF had limited resources and training for the task. While known and suspected minefields did not appear to severely impact socio-economic development within Lebanon, the fields of “hidden killers” have continued to threaten the population, inflict death and injury, inhibit growth, restrict movement and discourage the return of internally displaced and refugee populations. Over the decade following the civil war, the LAF reportedly cleared 315 known minefields, but over 500 remained.

The Process

Perry Baltimore, the Executive Director of MLI, and Paul Brown, Canine Specialist from Global Training Academy, which trains working dogs and handlers, conducted a study on behalf of the Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs at the U.S. Department of State to determine the applicability of mine detection dogs (MDDs) in Lebanon. The study found the

climate, culture, terrain and threat suitable for the work of dog teams. The high metallic content of much of the soil in affected areas made it very difficult for manual deminers equipped with metal detectors to work effectively and efficiently. The borders of minefields were ill defined, placing a premium on technologies that could assist in area reduction. Local populations were fearful of using previously cleared areas without a system of quality assurance (QA). The LAF had experience in the use of working dogs. Kennels and veterinary care were immediately available, making Lebanon an excellent candidate for an indigenous MDD program.

Following a visit to Global Training Academy in Texas by the President of Lebanon's National Demining Office, the Lebanese government requested dogs for its demining program. MLI immediately added Lebanon to its list of target countries for the K9 Demining Corps (K9DC) Campaign. This campaign seeks to develop an indigenous MDD capacity in severely affected countries by combining resources of the U.S. government, host nations and private donors. This process results in the deployment of certified dogs bonded with local handlers and integrated into the nation's mine action program.

MLI received private funds to purchase, train and deliver six MDDs to Lebanon through a donation from the Humpty Dumpty Institute (HDI) in New York. HDI, a non-profit organization, was founded in 1998 to create dynamic public-private partnerships to confront complex global challenges, specifically the international fight against landmines.

After three months of training in Texas, Bookman, Sally, Scooby, Speedy, Taz and Toughy deployed to Lebanon. Sally made a brief stop in New York, where

she demonstrated her mine detection abilities at a recognition ceremony at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. The ceremony honored HDI, Bill Rouhana (an HDI founder and Board member) and his wife, Amy Newmark, for their generous gift. Sally also performed at the Greenwich Day School in Connecticut, where Bill and Amy's children attend classes. One of the donated dogs is named after the school mascot, Bookman.

After acclimatizing to their new environment, the dogs began training with their Lebanese handler trainees, who were volunteers from throughout the country. Five of the six handlers were performing their mandatory service in the LAF. Upon successful completion of the Basic Dog Handlers Course, taught by Paul Brown and Lawrence Richardson from Global Training Academy, the handlers were formally inducted into the regular army.

The dogs and handlers graduated from the Basic Course in June 2001 and immediately began integration training with manual deminers. The MDD teams began work in July 2001 with QA projects, but once their value had been recognized, the dog teams assumed roles in clearance operations and survey projects. The dogs and their handlers travel from worksite to worksite with an assigned group of manual deminers permanently affiliated with the dog teams.

Accomplishments

The MDD teams have participated in demining projects throughout Lebanon. At first, the dogs began work in the Bekaa Valley and southern Lebanon, which suffers the most severe contamination. The teams worked an area in the western Bekaa known as Lucy's Farm. This area had been previously demined and was optimal for animal grazing or farming, but the local population was afraid to use the land.

Mine Detection Dogs

Once the MDD teams conducted their searches and verified the areas as mine free, the land was quickly returned to productive use. Another project in the area was a Muslim cemetery that had also been mined. The dog teams searched and cleared this land, which was of immense value to the community. Declaring the land mine-free allowed the local population to begin the process of returning to normal life.

The dog teams conducted QA operations and verified that a schoolyard was mine-free. This has alleviated the fears of many parents and allowed the children to play soccer at school for the very first time.

The dogs have also been very useful in assuring safe roads around Lebanon. The dog teams cleared a road from Machgara to Jezzine. The landmine contamination of the road forced local populations to take long detours; hence, travel from the south of the western Bekaa Valley to the Lebanese coast was severely limited. Now the people and goods can easily and safely travel from the Valley to the coast.

Working with a flail and manual deminers, the dog teams cleared a narrow road used by many shepherds to bring their flocks to the mountains for grazing. The road had been mined since the civil war, and there had been three AT mine incidents. Since starting work in September of 2002, the teams have detected parts of 11 2.2-kg AT mines but nothing intact.

The dog teams have been given increased responsibility. The primarily agrarian town of El Khiam is heavily dependent on their local reservoir. This reservoir is to be linked to a larger water project that will supply water to many people throughout southern Lebanon. When landmines were identified in the project area, dog teams and mechanical equipment were dispatched to eliminate the threat. Because of environmental considerations, the flail could not be used. The dogs were not only tasked with the QA measures but with landmine detection as well. The dogs successfully completed the project in September 2002, and work has resumed on the Khiam water project.

The MDD teams have also provided great assistance in a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

project to upgrade a reservoir in the small village of Arnoun. Three AT mines were found in the reservoir and work was stopped. The dogs cleared a path into the reservoir and over the reservoir floor. Working with a flail, over 2,500 sq m were cleared without finding another landmine. The USAID project has started again.

These are only a few of the numerous projects the MDD teams have participated in from July 2001 through October 2002.

Challenges

The MDDs in Lebanon have met and overcome a number of challenges. Many of these challenges also apply to manual deminers. One is the extreme daytime heat in the summer. The dogs must begin work at first light, usually 5:45 AM, and finish by 10:00 or 10:30 AM when it is too hot for them to continue. The cooler weather in autumn allows the dogs to work extended hours.

Much of the area in which the dogs must work is covered with thick brush, heavy vegetation and prickly thorns that impede the ability of the dogs to sniff the ground methodically. The U.S. government and RONCO Consulting Corporation have introduced a mechanical flail to remove the vegetation and facilitate the work of the dog teams.

The MDD teams have also faced behavioral and health issues. Scooby had to undergo extensive remedial training, and sadly, Taz passed away from cancer in December 2001. Ben and Rex replaced Scooby and Taz.

In early 2002, Lebanon suffered a period of long and intense rain that severely limited the dogs' ability to do their work. Extensive precipitation and moisture wash the explosive scent deeper into the soil, making it difficult for the dogs to detect the odor. However, once the storms subsided and the land dried out, the dogs returned to business as usual.

There has been an evolution in the methodology of the dog teams working with manual deminers. Initially, the dog teams traveled from worksite to worksite while the manual deminers trained to work with the dogs remained in place. A more efficient method was to assign the same group of manual deminers to the dog

teams permanently. This greatly reduces the amount of training that manual deminers have to go through to work with dogs. The two groups are more comfortable and familiar with one another, allowing the mine detection process to perform at its optimal level.

While there was a reasonable comfort level in the LAF in working with dogs, it was necessary to build confidence among the LAF leadership to allow the MDD teams to perform tasks beyond QA. Many leaders were initially uncomfortable in relying on the dogs for landmine detection but, with their demonstrated performance, the dog teams have earned the trust of the LAF and are now allowed to perform a variety of roles, as indicated in the Khiam water project.

Conclusion

The MDD teams working in Lebanon have proven to be an essential component of the national demining program. From July 2001 until October 2002, the teams searched and cleared nearly 75,000 sq m of land, allowing the local population to lead normal, productive lives. The work of the dog teams so impressed the Lebanese government that officials requested additional teams to bring the total number to 18. Working with manual deminers and a mechanical flail, the MDD teams have made the vision of a mine-free Lebanon an attainable goal and have brought greater peace of mind and safety to the communities.

In addition to our K9DC in Lebanon, MLI has played a key role in supplying MDD teams to Nicaragua, Eritrea and, in spring 2003, Armenia and Thailand. ■

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