

They Started With A Temple: JAHDS in Thailand

The Japanese Alliance for Humanitarian Demining Support (JAHDS), better known for its research and development of Ground Penetrating Radar (Mine Eye), recently became involved in mine clearance. In the process of testing mine clearance equipment, JAHDS cleared an area around an ancient Khmer temple.



by Paddy Blagden, Former Technical Director of GICHD

JAHDS is better known for research and development of Mine Eye and for supporting the demining efforts of other organizations, rather than for mine clearance. The need to test Mine Eye under operational conditions called for the creation of a test field with access to live mines. It follows that if you have a field with live mines, you might as well clear them.

The decision to step into the mine clearance arena was not taken lightly. JAHDS had been testing equipment in Thailand for some time, with the full co-operation of the Thailand Mine Action Centre (TMAC). It had also formed a working relationship with the General Chartichai Choonhavan Foundation (GCCF), a Thai NGO based in Bangkok, and the Thai Army, which had a Humanitarian Mine Action Unit (HMAU) working in the northeast of the country. JAHDS appointed Mr. Wataru Sugaya, an ex-master-mariner, as the project manager. JAHDS also needed an international specialist to provide the

field operational skills. They chose a South African, Johan Van Zyl, to be the Operations Manager. Zyl is a man of vast experience who is well known in the mine clearance world. They were ready to begin.

Obviously, you cannot start demining without a minefield. The project chosen was the area around the ancient Khmer temple of Sadok Kok Thom, close to the Thai-Cambodia border, north of the small border town of Aranyaprathet in Sakaeo Province. This temple is one of a network of Khmer temples, built about 1100 years ago, with the famous Cambodian temple complex of Angkor Wat as its centre. The Khmer Rouge, and other warring factions, may have mined the temple grounds as part of the border minefields. Clearance of the temple itself was needed to permit the promotion of increased tourism in the area and to provide access to land for local farming. The site was relatively small—about 340,000 square metres in all—but presented a range of problems, with vegetation varying from a flat grassy area to densely vegetated sections with large trees. The area was seen as a good site to build up experience. Thus, JAHDS started with a temple.

Starting from nothing is difficult and demands patience, determination and good planning. The JAHDS team started by setting up a working partnership with HMAU 1 and began the refresher training of the GCCF deminers. The area chosen was perfect for such training—a low-threat area, with medium vegetation, but well suited to a systems approach, using machines, manual clearance and dogs. As confidence and experience increased,

more GCCF deminers were recruited, and HMAU 1 was able to loan a BDM48 brush cutter and dog teams, and to carry out some of the Quality Assurance. They also allowed JAHDS to use a Tempest Mk 4 and a Pearson SDTT (Survivable Demining Tractor and Tools), a highly versatile and effective machine. A JAHDS-owned Hitachi brush cutter augmented these machines.

Thanks to the help of its working partners, the JAHDS programme is now going well, and the first sections of land have been formally handed back to the District, and are even now being cultivated. The work being done will be available for inspection by those attending the Fifth Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty. It appears JAHDS will meet its target completion date of October 2003. Life has always been “interesting” (remember the Chinese curse?) and never dull. The site was even visited by beautiful contestants for the “Miss Thailand” competition. No group of deminers has ever concentrated quite so hard.

For the future, there are other challenges in the border area, and even over the border in Cambodia, but JAHDS will never forget that they started with a temple. ■

Contact Information

Mr. Patrick Blagden
3 Old Compton Lane
Farnham, Surrey
GU9 8BS
UK
Tel: 41-22-609-16-74
Fax: 41-22-906-16-90
E-mail: paddy@blagden03.fsnet.co.uk

Miss Thailand competitors visiting demining site. C/O Paddy Blagden

