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John Wilkinson
RONCO

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Demining During Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan

The U.S. and Coalition forces' occupation of airfields at Bagram and Kandahar in Afghanistan during *Operation Enduring Freedom* was initially hampered by the presence of a large number of mines and UXO in both the immediate and surrounding areas of the airfields. U.S. and Coalition forces quickly came to understand that traditional countermine demining operations were insufficient to ensure troop habitability and operational safety in the base area, a situation not foreseen or provided for in current U.S. Army doctrine. This experience strongly suggests that the U.S. Army should assess its current countermine doctrine and introduce a doctrinal modification to take into account the future need to deal with mines and UXO in and around base areas.

by John L. Wilkinson, Vice President, Operations, RONCO Consulting Corporation

Introduction

In many ways, *Operation Enduring Freedom* has diverged from the usual pattern of U.S. and Coalition military operations that developed since the Vietnam War. Whether small-scale operations such as Urgent Fury in Grenada or Just Cause in Panama, or much larger-scale operations such as Desert Shield/Desert Storm in the Gulf or Allied Force in Serbia, the usual pattern since the 1970s has been one of mounting operations into enemy territory from friendly territory, and the usual pattern has been not to occupy enemy territory for extended periods of time.

While *Operation Enduring Freedom* began as did the others mentioned above, with the collapse of the Taliban government, Marine, U.S. Army and Coalition forces occupied Bagram and Kandahar airfields inside Afghanistan. Both have since been used as semi-permanent operational bases from which to conduct further military operations against the remnants of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan and adjoining border areas with Pakistan.

This change of pattern may well be-

come more of the norm as the war against terrorism progresses and U.S. and Coalition forces find themselves operating with increasing frequency from bases that are not necessarily in friendly or non-conflictive territory. As a result, and based on the experience since February 2002 in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army's doctrine on dealing with mines is likely to require revision or, at least, expansion to account for situations such as those encountered in Afghanistan.

Mine Clearance Vs. Demining

In U.S. Army doctrine, there is a clear delineation of responsibility between mine clearance operations, which are conducted by the Corps of Engineers, and removal and disposal of UXO, which is the responsibility of Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams attached to or integrated with combat units. Furthermore, there is a clear distinction in doctrine between mine clearance and demining; the latter, in fact, is not acknowledged as a military mission.

Army doctrine calls for breaching or clearing lines of communication through minefields, clearly demarcating the cleared borders, and moving through as quickly as operationally possible. A cer-

tain number of casualties are recognized as inevitable in such operations. Military minefields are usually laid to channel or delay movement, so that direct or indirect fire, or both, can be brought to bear on an opposing force that has slowed down or is concentrated at certain predetermined points as it attempts to traverse or avoid the minefield. As a result, Army doctrine emphasizes speed in dealing with such obstacles so as to engage and defeat the enemy directly, while reducing the exposure of units to enemy fire.

At this point, it is useful to note that Army doctrine on mine clearance continues to reflect readiness for a war of rapid movement, such as was expected in Europe and was carried out in the Gulf War. On the other hand, demining or humanitarian demining, where the goal is to render defined areas mine free or, more properly, mine safe, is not recognized as a military mission in doctrine. While it is true that U.S. Special Forces personnel receive training in humanitarian demining at Fort Leonard Wood, they do so in order to teach it to foreign military personnel. In combat, Special Forces do not have demining or humanitarian demining as a mission and they do not, indeed, have mine clearance as a mission either.

Operation Enduring Freedom

The occupation of Bagram and Kandahar airfields in Afghanistan, and their steady upgrade into semi-permanent operational bases for U.S. and Coalition forces has highlighted this doctrinal issue. Sadly, it has done so in the context of several casualties early in the occupation; at the same time, it has also highlighted for the U.S. Army the need, if not to rethink and redefine doctrine, then to account for situations in which demining (as opposed to mine clearance) is required to ensure operational safety and even troop habitability.

In their initial occupation of these bases, the Marine Expeditionary Force discovered wide areas that were infested with mines and UXO. Addressing these threats was hampered by the limited availability of mine detectors and other equipment. As a result, much of the early "demining" was accomplished by deploying troops in a line-abreast, using their bayonets to prod the ground in search of mines and UXO. Lamentably, this led to several casualties and fatalities, either as a result of accidents while conducting such operations or by areas mistakenly being declared as "cleared" following such operations.

An early response to this situation was the introduction of Jordanian Army Aardvark flails and, shortly thereafter, Norwegian-provided Hydrema flails. Both have since been used extensively in processing land within the perimeters of Bagram and Kandahar. The U.S. and Coalition forces, however, were soon exposed to the reality of flail operations:

while they can "process" land (and are especially useful in areas where vegetation must be removed or minimized) and detonate mines, they are also prone to leaving significant numbers of UXO, and some mines, in their wake.

Since the land processed by the flails was still dangerous and unfit for habitation or other operations, ARCENT contracted with RONCO Consulting Corporation to provide eight mine detection dog (MDD) teams. Four were assigned to Bagram and four to Kandahar, for what was planned to be an initial six-month period, beginning in early February 2002.

The MDD teams deployed by RONCO consisted of highly experienced dogs and their Bosnian handlers; most had been working together between four and five years and had previously worked in widely varying areas, including Bosnia, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, Namibia and Guantanamo Bay. The experience and success of these teams is reflected in the fact that one of them—Jaromir Josipovic and Brenda—was selected by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the Marshall Legacy Institute to receive a "Champions of Children" award in 2002, along with other luminaries such as Queen Noor of Jordan and Senators Chuck Hagel and Patrick Leahy.

Although contracted to work a six-day work week, it soon became evident that, in order to provide quality assurance at a pace commensurate with that of the flails and of the expansion needs of the military, a seven-day work week was necessary. As a result, after almost six months of operation, the eight teams had

provided quality assurance to more than 1.1 million square meters of land and in the process had discovered more than 6,000 mines and UXO, which were either collected for demolition or blown in place, as circumstances dictated.

While most of these mines and UXO have been detected behind flail operations, it is significant to note that a number of anti-tank mines have been detected ahead of the flails. The reason for this is simple: when flail operators suspected they would be processing land that might contain anti-tank mines, they requested that the MDD teams precede the flails in order to minimize or prevent the possibility of a flail hitting such a mine and incurring major damage.

The successful pairing of flails and MDDs is evident not only in the amount of land that has been subject to quality assurance. It is also evident in the fact that over the course of the handover of responsibility from the Marine Expeditionary Force to the 10th Mountain Division and now the 18th Airborne Corps, the incoming units have requested that ARCENT retain the MDD teams and, in fact, that RONCO manual deminers be added to the quality assurance process (a task that had been carried out by the dog handlers, all of whom also had demining experience). Furthermore, its success is reflected in the fact that, not only have the original eight MDD teams been extended for an additional six months, but RONCO has been contracted to provide eight more MDD teams (four Bosnian and four Mozambican) in Afghanistan as of September 2002.

The Lessons of Afghanistan

For the first time in some 30 years, the U.S. military has been conducting combat and related operations from operational bases located in territory that is only recently "friendly" and that is still subject to attacks. Furthermore, these operational bases are located in former front line areas (Bagram) or areas that were fortified and defended by one or more of the former warring parties (Kandahar). This environment has introduced special conditions and problems that are not currently addressed in U.S. Army doctrine.

Significantly, during the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army had an active military patrol dog program, under which canines were trained to detect booby traps and trip wires in support of combat operations. With the end of that war, this capability soon ceased to exist in the U.S. Army, although its basic characteristics lived on in Thailand's Military Dog Center at Pak Chong.

In 1989, when the Soviet Union retreated from Afghanistan and U.S. and other Western foreign assistance was provided to the successive Mujahedeen government, Thailand's contribution was the introduction of explosives and MDDs. While the MDD capability available worldwide has significantly expanded in the years that followed, the U.S. Army—which had innovated the use of canines in the detection of munitions—lacks the doctrine to conduct other than countermine (rapid movement) operations and the capability to undertake demining or humanitarian demining missions.

The principal lesson of *Operation Enduring Freedom* is that U.S. forces are more likely than in the past to find themselves deployed and stationed for relatively long periods of time in areas which are either conflictive or which are being occupied immediately after a conflict. By logical extension, the war on terrorism will see the deployment of significant numbers of U.S. military personnel into areas where they will be either participating in or directly supporting anti-terrorist and related military operations. The Philippines is an early ex-

ample of such a deployment as is, to a lesser extent, the assistance being provided to the nation of Georgia. Future such deployments might well take place in countries as widely varying as Colombia, Indonesia, Egypt and others in the Middle East.

A common feature of these potential deployments is that, by definition, the war on terrorism will feature operations against an armed enemy operating from its own "safe" or "home" areas. As demonstrated in previous guerrilla wars, to be effective such operations must displace the terrorists from their "safe" areas and disrupt their own operations by conducting anti-terrorist operations from within such areas, not from the outside. Doing so will increasingly expose U.S. and Coalition forces to the threat of emplaced mines, booby traps and other UXO on a routine basis.

A second lesson is that, at this point, the U.S. military is not well-prepared to meet the habitability and secure operational base requirements that arise from environments where mine and UXO infestation is a problem. This was evident in the early days of the Marine Expeditionary Force's deployment into Afghanistan, and has been addressed by the introduction of mechanical equipment operated by Coalition forces and by contracted MDD and manual deminer teams to provide quality assurance.

While the U.S. Central Command adapted to and found approaches to address the situation in which its troops found themselves, they did so despite doctrine. An early discussion between ARCENT and the U.S. Department of State, through which the RONCO MDD and deminer teams have been contracted using Department of Defense funds, was on the issue of "countermine operations vs. demining." The early insistence by ARCENT that "we do not engage in demining" was overcome by their realization that they, in fact, did not face a situation in which countermine operations were feasible or acceptable as an approach to the problem.

Recently, in a possible precursor to a doctrinal modification, the U.S. Army's Humanitarian Demining Center at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, has been exploring alternative approaches to the problem of mines and UXO, especially those involving the use of MDDs. Since

their studies will most likely take into account their experience in training Special Forces personnel in humanitarian demining, there is a likelihood that any recommendations they might make will include the development of a U.S. Army capability to conduct both countermine and demining operations. Whether this latter capability is organic or contracted (or some combination of the two) is an open question that will, most likely, be influenced by budgetary and operational considerations. In particular, the views of senior U.S. Army leadership will affect whether a demining capability (if established at all) is either created within a number of existing units or established as a free-standing, deployable capability available either serially or concurrently to a number of theaters of operation.

The third lesson of Afghanistan is that the issue of countermine vs. demining is, in fact, a non-issue and that it needs to be recognized as such. Quite simply, the U.S. Army must be prepared to address both missions. The use and threat of mines and UXO have proliferated to an extent that they are likely to be encountered in almost any conceivable anti-terrorist operation to which the U.S. Army will deploy troops. Further, the U.S. Army may again find itself in a situation such as the Gulf War, where minefield breaching and countermine operations were an essential precursor to the rapid movement and breakout into the rear of Iraqi forces.

The U.S. Army cannot choose one mission over the other; it will be presented with both threats and must be prepared to deal with them both. ■

**All photos courtesy of RONCO.*

Contact Information

John L. Wilkinson
Vice President, Operations
RONCO Consulting Corporation
2301 M Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20037
Tel: 202/785-2791
Fax: 202/785-2078
E-mail: jwillkinson@roncowash.com

Deminers work along-side landing planes and helicopters waiting for take-off.