Demining During Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan

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Demining During Operation Enduring Freedom

In Bosnia, there hasn't been much difference between a realist and a cynic, since neither had anything positive to say about the future—until now. Suddenly, optimists are respectable people again. Mr. Rowe knows better than anyone the reasons why. "We have a new management team already in place—there's finally a real chance for stability. And the government, with all its difficult circumstances, has begun to pick up its responsibilities—that shows it's interested in getting on with business."

For the first time since independence, the Bosnian government has conceived and executed a plan—the Demining Law—that paves the way for the resolution of a Bosnian problem such as a Bosnian system that will eventually rely entirely on national resources. "It's fairly simple, actually," Mr. Rowe explains. "We are at the point where the Bosnians can really take the lead in solving their problems, and that's always the best way to go!"

**References**

Most information for this article is from interviews with Mr. David Hume, Mr. Danas Gavran, Mr. Stephen Bryant and Mr. Paul Simmons in Sarajevo during June and July of 2002. I thank them for their cooperation and hospitality. Any errors, misinformation or mischaracterization in this article are my fault alone.

"All photos courtesy MAJC.

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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. Where once there were separate 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 not been to occupy enemy territory for extended periods of time. While Operation Enduring Freedom did as the others mentioned above, with the collapse of the Taliban government, Maritime, U.S. Army and Coalition forces occupied Baghram 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 become more of the norm as the war against terrorism progresses. U.S. and Coalition forces find themselves operating over a much wider area than conventional blast mines. Deminers are often lead to a minefield, clearing lines of communication through minefields, clearly demarcating the cleared borders, and moving through as quickly as operationally possible. A certain 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 the 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, 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.

**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 certain 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.

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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 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. Later, this led to several casualties and fatalities, either as a result of accidents while conducting such operations or by accidental detonation, and was timely being declared as “cleaned” following such operations.

An early response to this situation was the introduction of Jordanian Army Aardvark flails and, shortly thereafter, Norwegian-provided Hydraema 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 should 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 of whom had worked together between four and five years and had previously worked in widely varying areas, including Bosnia, Azerbajan, Kosovo, Namibia and Guanguan, Bay. The experience and success of these teams is reflected in the fact that one of them—Jarasum Jostovic and Benda—was selected by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the Marshall Legacy Institute to receive a “Children of Champions” award in 2002, along with other luminaries such as Queen Noor of Jordan and Senators Chuck Hagel and Patrick Leahy.

Contrary to what would be a six-week work, soon it 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 were not 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 operations suspect 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 MDD teams (four Bosnian and four Mongolian) 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 combined arms operations at operational bases located in territory that is only recently “friendly” and that is still subject to attacks. Furthermore, these operations are taking place in former front line areas (Bagram) or areas that were fortified and defended by one or more enemy forces (Kandahar), for example, in previous guerrilla wars, for example in Vietnam and in Afghanistan (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.

An early response to this situation was the introduction of Jordanian Army received from Afghanistan and U.S. and other Western foreign assistance was provided to the successive Mujahedeen Army’s capability from the introduction of explosives and UXO in certain environments where mine and UXO contamination is a problem. This was evident in 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 solutions 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 countermeasures 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 account their experience in training Special Forces personnel in humanitarian demining, there is a likelihood that any new doctrine related to these operations will also include the development of a U.S. Army capability to conduct both countermeasure and demining operations. Whether this latter case proves 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 existing units.

The third lesson of Afghanistan is that the issue of countermeasures 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 will probably be extended to an extent that they are likely to be encountered almost in any conceivable antiterror operation; 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 countermeasures 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.