

An Interview with Hendrik Ehlers of MgM

Hendrik Ehlers discusses the challenges facing demining in Africa, research and development, and mechanical clearance used by his company. His candid replies offer insight into the world of demining and managing a multifaceted organization.

by Margaret Busé, Editor

Margaret Busé (MB): Can you describe how MgM came to be formed in Germany in 1996?

Hendrik Ehlers (HE): My friend and partner since childhood, Hans Georg Kruessen, and I were on Christmas leave back home, when we learned that our contracts with GPC seconding ADP in Mozambique as instructors and supervisors of the survey plus explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) section were not renewed. We had no chance but to do what many people had told us to do before: make our own non-governmental organization (NGO). With the help of our old school pal Christoph Brocks this was done within a few days and MgM was legally founded on January 16, 1996.

MB: How has your experience, and the experience of the founders of MgM, shaped the way MgM has been structured?

HE: We wanted to avoid the situation that a HQ and/or board members in Germany could negatively influence our fieldwork. Therefore, the entire board, but three members, retired five minutes after the foundation case of beer was emptied. Hans Georg and I remained as majority over the silent third, Christoph. Kri then shaped the IT structure of MgM and we ran off into the bush. That gave us the unique structure to be in the field and to be on top of the organization. We call that the reversed pyramid. This enables us to be very flexible and to react based on field realities rather than hav-

ing to ask some distant body if we may buy a new truck or start a new operation. Without that, our Angola operations would have stopped long ago, just because there was no funding... To take it one step further, Hans Georg and me both later became chairmen, which lets us take the entire legal responsibility, too.

MB: What do you feel are the most unique aspects of MgM that set it apart from other demining organizations?

HE: The above structure is absolutely unique and so is the fact that both of us



■ Hendrik Ehlers

have no formal military background or similar education. Well, I was conscripted for a year as a radar operator on the Hawk system. We learned everything in the field by doing it, which as a side effect generated a number of self-built clearance and management devices that actually work. A very important thing is that we work in a team of multi-talents with maximum decentralized decision-making. We are a group of friends and 99 percent of our staff



■ The German mine sweeping organization MgM People Against Mines developed a new device for the clearing of land mines. It is now being deployed in the post war scenarios in Southern Africa with great success. c/o MgM

■ Mine detection dogs are an important link in the chain of events of a MgM mine sweeping operation. Requirements for success are continuous and thorough training of both dogs and handlers. c/o MgM



has remained the same for many years.

MB: Can you describe how MgM has grown over the last six years?

HE: We started with zero and my father allowed us to use his phone. We got the first \$600,000 (U.S.) from the German government in 1996, and it grew to an annual budget of \$3 million in 1998. Whereas the donors later supported Angola only very little (with the exception of the U.S. Department of State (DOS)), the R&D section Hendrik Ehlers Consultants (HEC) grew rapidly, so that the balance remains the same. The number of staff has remained constant at approximately 150 for Angola and Mozambique with seven ex-pats going to either area. With the latest development in Angola our staff might grow to 250 and thanks to the donations of private people, the annual budget for 2003 is forecasted at \$8 million.

MB: Have the methods of demining changed over this time?

HE: Very little. We started with mechanically assisted manual demining (MaM), and still work in the same former unique combination of mechanical preparation (vegetation cutting, grading) in combination with dogs and manual methods. The number of deminers and EOD with MgM was always very small. That is another area where I should have said we differ from other operators—most of our staff are drivers, machine operators and mechanics.

MB: What do you feel has been the most significant change in mine action since MgM has been operating?

Has it affected your organization?

HE: Introducing MaM thinking definitely has changed the way many operators work today. The other major change was to go away from destroying as many mines as possible towards socio-economic impact. From 1992 to 1994, we cleared a mine-belt around Xangongo in Kunene Province, Angola, of 42,000 AT mines. We destroyed some 25,000 AP mines, mostly stockpiled in the area, and cleaned ammo dumps from a thousand tons of explosive garbage. I think we saved some cattle. In 1996 and 1997 we cleared 250 kms of road from 23 mines in Bengo Province, Angola. As a result, almost 60,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned home after seven years in camps. Giving highest priority to social-impact has changed MgM and all other operators significantly.

MB: How important is transparency to MgM and how does MgM incorporate that aspect into its organization?

HE: Our motto is safety, quality, transparency and non-profit innovation. Since 1996, our website (www.mgm.org) has brought unheard-of inside project information out for the first time ever, and also challenged others to do the same via the infamous MgM Demining network. I think we have set the level here worldwide. It feels very nice to have nothing to hide and contribute to the community, be it through the invitation to communicate through the network, or to copy freely whatever we develop.

MB: How does MgM utilize innovations and technology in demining?

HE: When Hans Georg had to clear the road from Maputo to Renamo Garcia in 1995, a grader overtook him. The image of unearthed mines neatly lined up on the berms should define our later way of working, but not through inventing something, but by looking at military scrap yards and combine/modify existing

solutions into a working system. This was the case for the first boom mounted vegetation cutters on a Wolf and later Samil20s, for the armored graders with dogs (Voodoo System). We found a lot to learn in Vernon Joynt's pre-Mechem toolbox and only re-designed it. For Rotar Mk I and Mk II, we found solutions in the construction industry and now with our latest baby, the MMS, it was the hazardous environment demolition industry that offered the perfect robotic base. You will still hear a lot of this little machine; it is what everybody has been looking for. We experiment a lot and as we started relatively late. We could afford the luxury to buy state-of-the-art equipment in communication and documentation, as there was no need to be backwards compatible. We developed a standard kit for all vehicles using not only SELCALL HF, but also a passive global positioning system (GPS), which enabled the CommsCentre in Luanda to track all movement. We developed a number of specific software solutions for survey, logistics and archiving. We build our own field UPS, VPN-Sat comm suites, Survey Kits, First Aid Kits, mobile offices, etc. All of our development is strictly field orientated.

MB: What have been the successes and drawbacks of some of the technology that you have used?

HE: A major drawback is that prototyping is quite an expensive entertainment. Diversification of heavy kits causes some standing around; this is why we look more and more into multi-tools. On hi-tech, we have always underestimated the amount of training and supervision it takes. For example, in order to make an Angolan dog handler use a computerized weather station... This is why we favor low-tech like MMS and PWS, not excluding to combine them with hi-tech systems like Mineseye or similar.

MB: Where do you feel research and technology need to be headed to better aid demining operations?

HE: Detecting mines and/or defining areas free from explosives more effectively without compromising safety and quality.

MB: How does MgM specifically aid in the rebuilding of infrastructure?

HE: We got into it without really wanting to and then it quickly became an integral part of our work. If the road is not drivable, you have to re-build it, if the bridge is blown up, you have to build one, if there is no water, you have to repair the well/pump, if there is no health post, the paramedics make overtime, etc. After some time, this creates an entire system thinking and today we understand ourselves as not a pure EOD team anymore, but as a specialist team re-opening hazardous areas integrated into the aid work of other organizations.

MB: Do you have examples from your own work where demining has changed the socio-economic impact?

HE: The above-mentioned Bengo operation was called by a former World Food Program (WFP) Director the most successful repatriation operation WFP has ever done. Of those, we want to do many more.

MB: How has infrastructure development and socio-economic impact affected donor support for your organization?

HE: That is a tricky one. In the end you find yourself clearing the occasional ammo dump, just so that donors don't think you are lazy or incompetent by the low numbers of mines destroyed. We were once even threatened with funds abuse because making a road drivable was understood as such. We are not very active in mine awareness towards the affected population; we usually do this through a local partner NGO like Trindade in Angola. Mine awareness requires a lot of donor education, but this is rather difficult, as many donor representatives have just arrived in the country, are on leave, are just about to go somewhere else or know it all anyhow. There are exceptions, unfortunately few.

MB: How did MgM develop its Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)? Do you have a procedure for updating them or field input from your supervisors or deminers?

HE: The first one was adapting the 1995 ADP set written by Mike Croll, based on the British Army's handbook. We do an annual update and whenever a new technology or methodology is introduced we add a chapter. Responsible for this is our Safety Officer, Ken O'Connell, who in

this aspect is superior to Hans Georg and I. But, above all, there are the national SOP requirements, which differ significantly from country to country. In the future, the paperback version of IMAS will make everybody's life much easier.

MB: What do you feel is the most critical trait necessary in a deminer? In a field supervisor?

HE: They need discipline and concentration. They also need courage and dedication to the cause. It is very nice to see that our staff loves the work, and that is valid for all levels.

MB: How extensive is your training for deminers and supervisors?

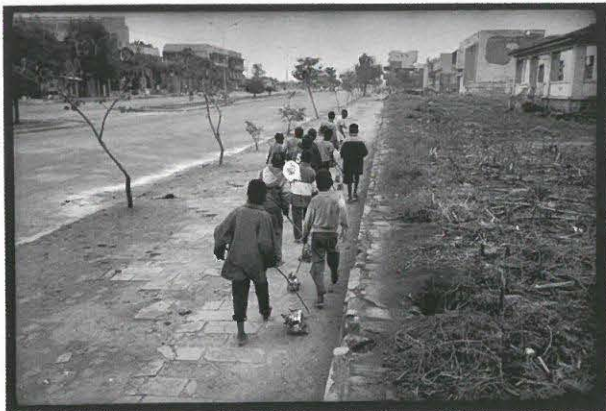
HE: Strictly demining related training is done in accordance with the requirements of the local authority like IND for Mozambique and INAROE for Angola. They certify SOPs and staff. Our Safety Officer, Ken, does additional refresher courses on base as needed. Dog teams are under permanent training/evaluation and so are paramedics through their work with the population. We stimulate local staff to get driver's licenses, take computer courses, learn languages, etc., but I guess all training could be better.

MB: What do you feel has been the most significant accomplishment in MgM's work in Angola?

HE: To have cleared significant areas from explosive hazards without a single accident neither through nor after operation. Also, that we have not left Angola, even in the worst financial and war situation. That is something we are proud of.



■ MgM's Rotar MK1 c/o MgM



■ Children in the Angolan slums. c/o Guy Tillim for MgM

MB: What are your future projects in Angola?

HE: Specialization on the clearance of roads, bridges, landing strips, etc. The workload for Angola is vast. The big vision is to clear from Kunene, via Kuando Kubango, to Moxico and through this, re-open and re-connect the entire east/north east with the rest of the country.

MB: Can you describe the significance in demining the Limpopo railway in Mozambique?

HE: There are two aspects. One is to create safe agricultural land for the population, which traditionally stretches along these 42 km of densely mined railway. The other is the technical challenge of a lousily laid minefield in various rows stretching 42 km through partially very dense vegetation with a dense population. This has become our number one test and application area for vegetation cutting and intelligent berming/sifting procedures. With a Hydrema Excavator, heavily modified by Hans Georg, and a MgM/HEC Rotar Mk II, we still are too slow. Hopefully, an extended test of the U.S. DoD NVESD HDD Unisifter will bring some more effectiveness into the process. The significance is also the dialogue between the sole donor, the German government and our conflict of quality against speed. Thank heaven the Germans continue to allow us to work on quality and do not apply something like commercial standards to this nightmare.

MB: What are MgM's activities in Namibia?

HE: Well, I live in Windhoek and run my duties as voluntary chairman from my house. From an office/workshop I also run the International Desk as Programme Manager in financial and logistics management. As it is not far, I also travel often to Kunene Province and handle operations personally. But most things done in Namibia have to do with my company HEC, which is the R&D branch for MgM. HEC designs and builds demining equipment of all sorts and does the testing and documentation of our R&D joints with U.S. DoD, EC-ESPRIT and others. Namibia is the rotating disc in the center of MgM. HEC is a non-profit commercial feed into MgM. Its income pays for staff (like me) that cannot be paid through demining funds and all it generates in terms of equipment is directly channeled into MgM's demining operations. Thanks to a special agreement with the Angolan Government, MgM also runs a non-profit commercial workshop in Ludanda serving the NGO community and paying for MgM's administration and logistics in Luanda. All of the above is handled from the international desk in Namibia and audited through MgM Germany, which links MgM Swiss, MgM Austria and MgM U.S. Future plans of HEC are that it will develop into a more commercial developer, manufacturer and deployment agent for in-house, out-sourced demining equipment and services worldwide. This will focus on specialized demining equipment and services which are not common to normal demining operators. As we don't foresee this effort to be a donor-driven concern, we still are working on a multi-sector business model that makes this viable and enhances our demining activities at the same time.

MB: What variables contributed to the demining efforts along the Ruacana power lines in Namibia?

HE: I think that Namibian Defense Force (NDF) and U.S. DOS did a successful job. I really appreciate that this job was

finished and not left half-done—as it sometimes looked like. One can only congratulate U.S. DOS for their ongoing commitment to this threat. I believe that the training of local capacities still could be optimized. The special drill of the sifting of berms is definitely not applicable to the challenges the NDF deminers find in areas like Caprivi and Kavango today.

MB: What are the future demining efforts for MgM?

HE: We will revolutionize demining worldwide. Together with a group of young scientists, I will present a new technology called PWS during the U.S. DoD Workshop in Washington 22-27 August. In relation to this, Havard Bach will have to rewrite his view of future demining technologies that he wrote in your last issue.

MB: Based on your extensive field operations in Africa, what do you feel has been the most catastrophic result of landmines in Africa?

HE: Something we call “The return of the white spots” relating to large areas without people and without information, like on medieval maps. You don't know about these areas and the problems people suffer, as nobody can go there. This is the real catastrophe, but we, as the demining community, can stop this and make the world a better place. I do not like to think of demining as something saving individual's lives—although it does, and is an essential part of it. But in my dreams the faces of 80,000 victims of landmines in Angola alone sometimes haunt me. We have to become better and do more. ■

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