

One of a Kind:

The Quick Reaction Demining Force

Mr. Harry "Murf" McCloy shares some of his insights into the formation and resulting success of the U.S. State Department's unique Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRDF).

by JJ Scott, MAIC

Introduction

Escorting an idea along the path from concept to reality often entails a journey that is ridiculously roundabout, strewn with obstacles, and complicated by bureaucratic bungling. These tribulations ensure that only the most original, innovative, useful and timely ideas make it to the concluding stage: final judgment by the real world. Approval from this harsh arbiter sets the few truly special ideas apart from the chaff. Mr. Harry "Murf" McCloy hatched just such a singular idea and shepherded it dutifully through all its trials, eventually presenting the world with the QRDF: a unique squad of highly trained, well-equipped deminers who travel worldwide, responding to emergency demining situations wherever the need arises. Mr. McCloy now serves as the teams' Program Manager, a job he tackles from his position at the U.S. State Department (DOS). I spoke with Mr. McCloy about the QRDF's origins, ideology, deployments and final judgment.

Origins

In 1999, the stage was set for a humanitarian disaster in the Balkans. The war in Kosovo had driven a massive number of civilians from their homes, forcing them to seek temporary shelter in sprawling refugee camps. After punishing NATO air strikes convinced Slobodan Milosivic to end his vicious campaign in June, the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) began the arduous trek home, a journey made more difficult by hundreds of thousands of landmines and UXO deposited during the citizens' ab-

sence. Mr. McCloy recalls, "In Kosovo, all of a sudden the war ended, and it was obvious that there were going to be hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding back into dangerous areas. That constitutes a real crisis situation."

It was a situation the world had seen before, but this time the outcome would be different. Mr. McCloy had been working since 1998 on plans for a demining force that could respond to just such emergencies. "I guess you could say I came up with a concept and then set it up," he explains, "and that worked so well that it was decided to make it a full-time thing." Along with others at the DOS and in Kosovo, Mr. McCloy hastily assembled a demining squad and put them to work. That first team of deminers arrived in Kosovo quicker than any others and provided emergency clearance of heavily traveled roads, clearing a safe path for the imminent deluge of weary refugees while the longer-term programs geared up. The squad saved lives and became the template for a permanent force of deminers now known as the QRDF.

Brainstorming

Building on that experience, Mr. McCloy and others in the DOS set about designing a strategy that would give a few demining teams the means to respond to demining crises as epitomized by the Kosovo situation quicker than any previous mobile demining group. The DOS determined that they needed a standing force of deminers who were always on call, able to commence emergency operations anywhere in the world within two weeks of notification.

Next, the DOS had to locate a home base for the team that would satisfy sev-

eral criteria. After scouting the world, planners swiftly settled on Mozambique. Mr. McCloy detailed the reasoning behind the choice: "Why did we establish the QRDF in Mozambique? Well, we were looking for a country that had a serious mine problem to begin with because we knew the QRDF wasn't going to be deployed 100 percent of the time. We knew there was going to be a lot of the time when they would not be deployed outside of [their] national boundary." He added, "Since we were going to be paying for [the force], we wanted there to be work for them to do while they were deployed as well as work for while they weren't." An abundance of qualified deminers within the country also simplified the decision. "We had a nice convergence there: you had a country in need and a surplus of trained deminers that would be available immediately, and it would be economical to spin them up and get them ready to go out," Mr. McCloy concluded.

An experience that Mr. McCloy had while running the U.S. demining program in Kosovo may have solidified the decision to base the QRDF in Mozambique and staff it entirely with Mozambican deminers. He explains, "I first started working with those guys in Kosovo. We needed to bring in some deminers to do some demining of a suspected mass grave. I told them they ought to bring in Mozambicans because they were politically neutral. It was obvious that they weren't Serb, they weren't Muslim, they weren't Croat—they were these guys from Africa. It worked out perfectly, and they did a good job for the International War Crimes Tribunal."

After answering the what, who and where questions, the DOS tackled the how. They enlisted demining contractor RONCO's assistance in constructing the QRDF. Outlining the DOS' relationship with RONCO, Mr. McCloy said, "We turn to them and say, 'This is what we want. We want a Quick Reaction Demining

Force, we want it so big, we want it to have dogs and all the other stuff,' and then they go out and buy the equipment, build the facilities, screen and hire deminers, and get the dogs ready." In short, RONCO did the dirty work necessary to create the QRDF. RONCO formed four 10-man teams along with eight mine detecting dog (MDD) teams, each consisting of one dog and one trainer. According to Mr. McCloy, "These are manual demining teams with MDD capabilities," but if the situation requires it, "they are capable of operating with mechanical equipment." All are based near Beira, Mozambique, and trained in the latest demining techniques.

Ideology

The DOS designed the QRDF for very specific situations and therefore limits its deployment to suitable events. Mr. McCloy explained how the DOS determines the QRDF's missions: "There are some things that are going on every day in the demining landscape that the normal programs take care of. We look for places where quick demining assistance needs to be applied." He added, "This program is not designed to cure a country's demining ills. It's sort of a brushfire fighter. It's only there to provide immediate assistance where no other assistance is available." Living up to the "Q" in QRDF, the force's deployments generally last three to six months, just enough to "serve as a bridge while the longer-term stuff is getting on the road," according to Mr. McCloy.

There are some requirements that a situation must satisfy before the DOS will deploy the QRDF. For example, the DOS demands that hostilities cease prior to the team's departure in a bid to ensure the deminers' safety. "We're not putting them out there to get killed. They're not sent in as a peace enforcing entity, but rather to reinforce peace. They're not there to push people apart; they want to help them get back together," Mr. McCloy stated. After all, deminers' jobs are dangerous enough without having to worry about bullets flying overhead or directly at them.

The four teams are each capable of

working independently or in conjunction with one, two or all three other teams, with or without dogs. Mr. McCloy pointed out the flexibility this arrangement offers, saying, "We can shoot them all in at once or we can phase them in and out or rotate them or send them out two and two, three and one." Rotating the teams between foreign assignments and their day-to-day tasks around Mozambique also keeps the men's morale up. "You can't just use these guys like a rag to wipe up the bar, they have to go and see their wives and kids. That's one of the reasons we've got the QRDF broken up into separate teams," he explained.

Deployments

Despite the DOS' best efforts to keep the teams near their families, the QRDF's job descriptions—respond to emergency demining situations anywhere in the world within two weeks of notification—means the men must keep their passports ready. Since its inception, the DOS has officially deployed QRDF components twice, to Sudan and then Sri Lanka. While battling the heat in Sudan, two teams from the QRDF managed to demine several essential roads "so that the people who were doing the peacekeeping and refugees who were returning could move around freely and do what they had to do," Mr. McCloy said.

Another situation emerged soon after the Sudan deployment, sending the remaining two QRDF teams to tropical Sri Lanka. The long-simmering conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government has finally cooled off a bit, allowing thousands of refugees their first chance to return home in years. As in Kosovo, however, thousands of mines littered their path, a perfect opportunity for the QRDF to show its stuff. "In Sri Lanka they're working for the government, but they are demining in the government occupied areas where a large portion of the Tamil population is. So with the assistance of the government they're conducting demining so the refugees can come and occupy the homes that they did before the war kicked them out of there," Mr. McCloy announced. As in Kosovo, "they're there to try and pave the way for

a heavy influx of refugees now that peace has broken out."

While all four teams were occupied, a new and very different emergency situation materialized in Nigeria. An ammunition depot exploded in Lagos, sending showers of UXO and red-hot shrapnel raining down on a nearby residential district. The DOS quickly scrambled an ad-hoc team of deminers from Mozambique, since "it was a situation that certainly could be taken care of on an emergency basis by the resources we had available to us," because the infrastructure was already in place, according to Mr. McCloy. The new teams, though operating in the same capacity as the QRDF and under the direction of the DOS, will not be maintained permanently.

The mission in Sudan ended after five weeks, and the DOS foresees an in-country stay of at least three months for the Sri Lankan and Nigerian projects. With one job under their belts and two others well underway, I asked Mr. McCloy to rate the teams' performance so far. He said the only problems encountered have involved "the simple stuff, like how to import explosives into a country, stuff like that." He continued, "There's nothing out there that's been a showstopper, as long as you understand that you don't conduct each QRDF deployment based on what you did the last time. Basically, most problems can be taken care of with planning and foresight."

The Verdict

With no major problems as of yet, Mr. McCloy eagerly shared his opinion of the QRDF's performance to date. "The way you judge the success of an operation is by determining if it achieves what you sent it in there to do. Like in Nigeria, they sent it in to clear up all that exploded ammunition, and the fact is that we're getting rid of a lot of it," he said. Such success has earned the QRDF commendations from officials in both the Nigerian and Sri Lankan governments. In Nigeria, Mr. McCloy reports that "the government is saying, 'We wish you could stay longer,' so that says we're being successful down there." And the "Sri Lankan government loves it...because there was

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a peace process that needed to be reinforced, and demining can do that,” he continued.

It appears as though the QRDF has fulfilled its mission more successfully than anyone imagined except, perhaps, for Mr. McCloy himself. He believes that “this thing has been really worthwhile. It’s worked well and I think it’s going to get better.” He pointed out that what makes the QRDF such an achievement is its uniqueness, since “once you’ve got [the deminers] together and you give them supervision, you’ve got the world’s only

QRDF.” No other group of deminers on earth can respond to a demining-related crisis as quickly or deal with an emergency as comprehensively as the QRDF. Whether clearing the way for floods of refugees tantalized by the promise of peace or responding to some unforeseeable disaster, the men of the QRDF are in a position to save people’s lives who would previously have been out of luck. Mr. McCloy concluded, “This is an idea whose time has come and the U.S. has done it. It’s the actuality of what’s available and how quickly it can be brought

to bear on real demining crisis situations. That’s what’s really neat about the QRDF.” ■

Contact Information

JJ Scott
MAIC
scottjj@jmu.edu

Mr. Harry “Murf” McCloy
The DOS Humanitarian Demining
Program
harrym@hdp.org