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The Mine Detection Dog Center for Southeast Europe

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIJA ALILOVIĆ

MRE presentation for almost 100 children from different parts of BiH. Children spent time with Brenda, a retired MDD, at a summer camp on Lake Boracko.

The vision of the MDDC is to improve the lives of the people of southeast Europe through the use of dogs and handlers to detect landmines, as well as to combat terrorism and narcotics trafficking and assist the disabled.

by Marija Alilović
[Public and Donor Relations Officer, MDDC]

General Information and Activities of MDDC

The Mine Detection Dog Center for Southeast Europe (MDDC) is an institution of the Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) government. The Center was established by a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the U.S. Department of State, the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH. The MDDC is located in Borci near Konjic, and officially opened on October 14, 2003. For the first three years, operations are being funded by the U.S. government.

The main purpose of the establishment is to build facilities and train personnel from the Southeast Europe Mine Action Coordination Council. The need for an indigenous capacity to train mine detecting dogs (MDDs) and to share knowledge on how to train and use them in mine action was recognized. Since many MDDs are approaching retirement age, workers receive training on how to handle the dogs, as well as how to train new ones.

The MINE DETECTION DOG CENTER for Southeast Europe



The MDDC has a number of ambitious goals, some of which can be accomplished relatively quickly. In the short term, the MDDC hopes to reduce the threat of mines by training MDD teams and developing a cooperative relationship with national institutions and the international community. Long-term goals include developing the ability to train search-and-rescue dogs as well as companion dogs. In addition, studying the science behind canine disciplines will enhance the public's confidence in MDDs and other dog specialities.

The MDDC will also make a contribution to the global fight against terrorism by training explosive detection dogs and handlers. To fight the scourge of drug trafficking, the Center also hopes to train narcotics-detecting dogs and their handlers. The MDDC has created a project called Narcotics and Explosives Detection Dogs Training to improve the efficiency of police forces and state border service of BiH.

Current Operations

Since the summer of 2004, the MDDC has conducted a mine risk education (MRE) program for children. The program uses Brenda, a retired

MDD, as the mascot of the project. The presence of Brenda at MRE presentations makes children more interested in listening and focusing, as they show a great interest in MDD training.

At the Marshall Legacy Institute's Champion for Children benefit gala held in the United States in May 2002, Brenda was given the award for Mine Detection Dog of the Year. At the same event, many distinguished individuals involved in mine action were awarded for their contribution in improving and saving children's lives. The awards were given out by Queen Noor (former queen of Jordan).

In the spring of 2005, the MDDC trained MRE instructors and a professional handler to work with children ages 9 to 13. Although the creation of MDD teams for southeast Europe is the main task, activities are not limited only to MDDs.

The MDDC also provides the capacity for various personnel training courses and supports victim assistance projects, such as the one organized by Eco-Sports Group Sarajevo.

MDD Training

The Center's MDD teams are accredited by the BiH Mine Action Centre (BHMALC). Training for both MDDs and handlers is conducted with expertise from trainers of Global Training Academy (an organization from San Antonio, Texas) and the MDDC. Besides training MDD teams, the MDDC initiated the development of the regional standard for the use of MDD teams in southeast Europe. The Center organized several workshops with experts from BHMALC, international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Global Training Academy.

MDDC activities do not include breeding. The trainers make the selection of untrained dogs from 9 to 13 months of age from the world's best breeding centers. The most common breeds of dogs trained at the MDDC are German Shepherds and Belgian Malinois. Because they are general-purpose working dogs, these breeds have high trainability, intelligence and focus as well as the ability to bond with humans, and they have proven to be highly efficient in mine detection. Even though MDDs are expensive to maintain, they are extremely efficient in identifying the

exact location of mines, as well as supporting machines and manual deminers.

The MDDC uses large training areas and training fields with various types of mines buried in the ground. With 24 spacious and climate-controlled kennels, the MDDC provides excellent conditions for the dogs, along with regular veterinary examinations and daily care. Initially using expertise from Global Training Academy, the MDDC enabled a capacity for local production of MDDs. After three months of dog training and three months of integration into the MDD team with the handler, these teams undergo a national testing and accreditation procedure.

After they have been trained, MDDs have many characteristics such as focus, steady movement, accuracy and consistency of repetitive actions, endurance, and responsiveness to the handler. The usual training method at the MDDC is turning the search for an odor into a game. The dogs are working for a reward, which is usually a rubber ball. The training phases of



ABOVE: MDDC trainer A. Skenderagic with dog Machi.
LEFT: Dog handlers training in the field.



each dog are constantly being evaluated and improved, thus creating reliable and well-trained MDDs.

Most demining operations cease during the winter months. This inactivity makes MDDs less effective. For that reason, the MDDC constructed an indoor training facility, which allows continued work with the MDDs during the winter. In addition, this training prepares them for the upcoming demining season. The MDDC offers the training facility to other demining organizations during the winter. The indoor facility contains search boxes that measure 10 meters by 10 meters (10.94 yards by 10.94 yards) and are similar to the outside training fields.

Achievements and Goals

On October 19, 2004, the MDDC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the

Marshall Legacy Institute to train 12 MDD teams for three national organizations: Pro Vita, Stop Mines and BiH Demining. As a result of interest from Slovakia in MDDC operations, in December 2004, the MDDC received a donation of two young police dogs from the Ministry of Police in Bratislava, which have been trained as MDDs. The MDDC expects to deploy more teams in the next season. During that period, the MDDC will continue to train new groups of MDD teams.

Conclusion

The MDDC continues to contribute to the fight against landmines in southeast Europe and elsewhere. The organization is a new asset created in order to help speed up humanitarian demining efforts. Though the initial focus is to train dogs to detect landmines, additional tasks have developed

to train dogs and handlers to detect narcotics, provide security, and facilitate search and rescue operations. ♦

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