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The Military in Mine Action: An Interview With LTC Bob Crowley, U.S. SOUTHCOM

Nicole Kreger

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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THE MILITARY

An Interview With LTC Bob Crowley, U.S. SOUTHCOM

IN MINE ACTION

Nicole Kreger (NK): What has the military contributed to mine action over the past 15 years?

LTC Crowley (LTC C): I can only talk about what we’ve done in Latin America in the SOUTHCOM (U.S. Southern Command) AOR [area of responsibility], for the past 15 years. Even before 15 years ago, before there was a U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) Program, which at the time was called Demining Program, we had Special Forces folks down in Honduras training the Hondurans how to demine. First of all, the way the program works is the Department of State has the lead. They have the final determination on whether we’re going to have an HMA program with another country or not. So until that demarcation is made, we can’t do any demining training. But when it is made, what we see is SOUTHCOM bring to the table is technical expertise, and we’ve had active demining programs in Guatemala and El Salvador that are closed down now, current programs in Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru and the new one in Chile.

So what have we done? We helped the Organization of American States (OAS) establish MARMINCA [Mission of Assistance for the Removal of Mines in Central America], which is an OAS program that relies on officers and non-commissioned officers from throughout Latin America in the Marminca Center, which is in Managua. We’ve trained deminers in all the countries I just mentioned, and in addition, we’ve built regional mine action centers [MAC] in Ecuador and Peru.

What we do from the Department of Defense [DoD] side is a Train-the-Trainer program with three components to it. We’ll have a team of experts that’s emplaced in the United States that is comprised of military Special Forces personnel and sometimes conventional engineers as well. We always have Civil Affairs personnel and information operations specialists that go down. The team will go to the Humanitarian Demining Training Center [HDTC] at Fort Leonard Wood where they will be trained to the international standard as deminers. They need to have that certification before they’re allowed to go anywhere, and once they get down there, there are three components to the program. The first component is the technical advice and assistance in training: how to identify a minefield, how to mark a minefield, how to clear it, how to remove the mines, working with dogs—the soup to nuts of demining. But manual or even mechanical demining alone is not a stand-alone operation. The other two components are mine risk education—[for example,] I mentioned the Superman comic books [landmine awareness tools published by DC Comics in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Defense and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF)]. That’s the second aspect—the third aspect is in organizing and running regional mine action centers, which includes the database training that we teach as well as the community outreach and development that our civil affairs personnel work on the demining missions. And we’re very close to closing out our programs in Nicaragua and Honduras. Ecuador and Peru will take a little while longer. Chile has 275 minefields on their northern border area, and that’s take a few years. But in Southern Command, we are postured to be the first regional combat command that is mine-safe. That’s a huge success.

NK: How would you say the role of the military in humanitarian demining has changed or developed over the years?

LTC C: Initially, the program, I wouldn’t call it a huge, but it took Department of Defense and Southern Command awhile to establish the relationships that we have with OAS, to come up with the exact right template of forces that are needed for a problem. Right now, before any demining mission, we do a comprehensive pre-deployment site survey to identify exactly what the train needs to do when they’re down there, and that’s done about six months before the mission. During that period of time, the train is learning the situational awareness of the mine problem on the ground, what the community needs, the type of training the partner nations military needs, and it is able to go through a very programmatic process and preparation phase, so that when they go down, it’s not a bunch of guys showing up saying, “Hey, we know how to demine. What do you need?” It’s a thought-out, well-organized, planned and executed procedure with a number of check-

lists to make sure that we’re not leaving anything out and we’re addressing all of the requirements that not just the partner nation military has but the civilians as well. It’s a multi-national effort that is well-programmed, and that’s just a matter of growth and continuity of personnel in key positions and experience in the program.

NK: You were just talking about addressing the community need—how does the community react or how receptive are they to the military coming in and conducting the demining operations?

LTC C: First of all, of all the countries in which we’re currently conducting demining operations—Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru—those are countries that are used to having a military presence because our demining operations and HMA programs started after their conflicts were over. They have gone from a period of either civil war or international conflict where people are killing each other to a period now where the military is coming in and helping them get their land back. The communities are wonderfully receptive. It is absolutely unbelievable. We’re received with open arms by community leaders and the population. We’re there to help them solve their problem. The community relations are critical component of it, and that’s what our civil affairs personnel work when they’re down there. I can’t think of an instance where we’ve had anything but wonderful reception from the communities—from the national level all the way down to the people that are in a particularly community of any size.

NK: How would you say the military approach to mine action is different from the humanitarian sector approach?

LTC C: That’s a great question. Probably the biggest difference is that we do not actually conduct demining operations. We train the trainers on how to conduct demining operations. And that’s a policy decision that the United States has made in which our forces are not authorized to actually pick up or remove mines. Our mission is to train the partner nation personnel in how to do that. Now, if you look at HALO Trust or MAG [the Mines Advisory Group]—a number of the NGOs [non-governmental organizations] go out and they actually conduct the demining operations. Our focus really is on capacity building in the demining area and not the conduct of the demining operations.

NK: When you’re saying that you train the trainers, are you usually training the in-country military?

LTC C: Yes, we are. And in the case of MARMINCA, for example, MARMINCA again is an OAS organization, but that’s an international group of military personnel. Our focus for the procedures, the actual demining operations, yes, we are training the other militarys on how to demine in their own country.

NK: What would you say are the benefits or drawbacks of using military forces as opposed to an NGO or a corporate organization carrying our demining?

LTC C: First of all, I think it’s right that the military has the lead responsibility for demining within their own country. The military are there as a result of what had been a military problem, and I think it’s most appropriate that the military take care of that problem, I respect the DOD out of NGOs that they do. Fifteen years ago, it was not as well-programmed, and that’s just a matter of growth and continuity of personnel in key positions and experience in the program.

NK: Can you give me an example of a success story that you know of in the military in humanitarian demining?

LTC C: The biggest success story we’re going to have in the SOUTHCOM area is coming up. Ecuador and Peru were fighting a border war in 1994. Following their ceasefire agreement, the United Nations established the United Nations Mission to Ecuador and Peru (UNMEP). Now, there are still tensions in that area because Ecuador and Peru. It’s been a disputed border; the ceasefire agreement reestablished the border. But, later on this year—and we’re looking at the fourth quarter—we’re going to be conducting a humanitarian mine action mission that is not bilateral in nature. Most of them—are we going to country “X” and work with those people. In this case, you’re going to have deminers from Ecuador and Peru train at the Peruvian Engineer School. We will train them in demining tactics, techniques and procedures. Then we will go up to the border area, the Peru/Ecuador border, and those deminers will conduct demining operations on both sides of the border. What does that mean? That means Peruvians are going to be demining Ecuador and Ecuadorians are going to be demining Peru. And then from there, we’ll go to Quito, Ecuador, where we’ll conduct some follow-on training. That is a multilateral as opposed to a bilateral mission. Absolutely a huge success, and we’re looking towards fourth quarter of this year to execute that mission.

NK: Do you think it is important for mine action programs to have visiting military Technical Advisors?

LTC C: It depends on the capabilities of what they have.... Not always. You take a look at Honduras and Nicaragua, right now those programs are almost complete. There are Nicaraguan deminers right now in Iraq that were trained by the United States military. Now those guys are as good as anybody. Do they need us now to tell them how to demine? No. They don’t need our assistance at this point. So it depends on the maturity of the program. If they’re in their particular country, I expect when we get down to Chile and start the program in Chile in 2005, they’ll be a very professional army, so our technical assistance will probably fade out. But if we’re going to train them we won’t have to start at the ground floor with the Chileans. So it depends on the capabilities and the particular situation in any given country.

NK: How do you feel the train-the-trainers program has helped support our military and how nations?

LTC C: One of the ancillary benefits we get from any operation we do in this nature is the individual contacts and bonding, for lack of a better word, that occurs between professionals. Whether they’re mili-
The Role of Military Technical Advisors

Introduction

In 1989 a multinational contingent of soldiers began to arrive in Pakistan to support a humanitarian mine action program for Afghan refugees. They were, in effect, Technical Advisors (TAs) in the field of humanitarian mine action, and in the years since, military TAs have participated in many other programs. This has not been without its commercial aspects.

For the purposes of this discussion (and acknowledging that some will not fit this description precisely) a military TA is a serving soldier who is attached to a humanitarian mine action program in a training, advisory and mentoring capacity. The military TA differs from visiting military forces in three respects. He or she is not—or should not be—a short-term visitor, but rather is in the TA position for a period of six months to one year. The military TA is not part of a formed military unit, although national contingents within a program are usually under the control of their service representative for administrative, personnel and disciplinary purposes. Finally, he or she is not armed and may not necessarily wear a uniform.

I must confess a certain bias on my part; I have been a military TA and I am immodest enough to believe that my efforts were not entirely in vain. I have also known and worked with many military TAs, from my own country and from others, and while they were not all well-suited to the task, I believe that most of them did good work. Somewhat inevitably, therefore, I am going to conclude that the use of military TAs is not a bad thing. I have structured this discussion according to what I perceive to be the three main concerns: ability, money and philosophy. Or, more simply, can they do the job, how much do they cost and should they be doing it anyway?

by Rohan Maxwell, Major, Canadian Army