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The Use of Belgian Military Experts in EOD

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Use of Belgian Military Experts in EOD

For many years, a large debate over the use of military experts in humanitarian demining has existed. Some individuals are against military demining arguing the military performs different techniques and holds different priorities from humanitarian demining. Others are favorable towards military demining as they are the majority of demining centres. The Belgian military has been active in demining since World War I (WWI) and still today, explosive remnants from WWI and World War II (WWII) remain a daily concern in the life of the Belgians. The fields need to be cleared for many years, yet everyday military experts still dispose of UXO or abandoned explosive ordnance (AXO). It is important to understand this process does not take place during a military operation. Rather it is placed within the framework of helping the population, a type of humanitarian demining.

History

The explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) service was created immediately after WWI. This service was active throughout Belgium, initially as a detachment to each Provincial Recovery Service. By 1922, many landmines were disposed of, giving the impression it would only take a few months to complete the project. Unfortunately, it became clear the UXO problem was far from over. In an effort to tackle this issue, the Ordnance Disposal Service was created on October 1, 1923.

After WWII, numerous Belgian military units were directed to dispose of the obstacles and mines laid in both world wars. These units were sent throughout Belgium. On August 16, 1941, the EOD service was reorganized, after the captive personnel were freed, to dispose of all explosive devices and preserve any devices of military importance. Bomb disposal teams quickly formed in towns that suffered from bombing during the wars and in places where old minefields, ammunition dumps or explosive charges were discovered. The EOD service activities continued to extend the tasks entrusted to it by staying in constant contact with several resistance groups and with allies. Through this constant interaction, EOD was able to inform London of possible manufacturing errors in fusing systems and of likely cases of non-explosive bombs. The bomb disposal experts also recovered explosives of defused devices and passed on the remaining explosive fillers to resistance groups for sabotage purposes.

On October 16, 1944, the Explosive Ordnance and Obstacle Disposal Service was created as an official addition to the EOD service and Belgian Armed Forces. In the first year, 303 men worked under the responsibility of the military TA's.

Conclusion

Although relative quality is difficult to assess, the average ability of military EOD is on par with the rest of the humanitarian mine action community and the financial and philosophical arguments against the service of military TA's are not valid. The use of military TA's are a useful and usable resource, and since it would be startling indeed to hear a mine action manager complain of a surplus of resources, it must conclude—as promised—that humanitarian mine action benefits from the use of military TA's.

Endnotes

22. Ibid, p. 57.

* Photos are the author.

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The Inter-service Territorial Command (ITC) was founded in 1995 due to a general each year, on the basis of the armed forces. ITC was established to bring together all bomb disposal units in charge of territorial bomb disposal operations under one command. This was the last major change for the EOD unit.

Current Activities

Today the Belgian bomb disposal battalion comprises 23 officers, 151 non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and 131 corporals and civilians, thus a total of 307 personnel of which 172 are bomb disposal experts (16 officers, 100 NCOs and 56 corporals). The battalion is composed of three companies decentralized over the entire national territory.

The first task of the unit is the clearance of UXO and ARO left in Belgium from the two world wars. Despite the proposal to dissolve the unit in 1971, the bomb disposal unit still reacts today to an average of 3,500 requests a year ranging from hand grenades to aircraft bombs up to 500 kg or more.

Consequently, the battalion handles an average of 250 tons of ammunition every year. Some 20 tests of “problem ammunition” (suspected chemical ammunition) are recovered each year, especially in the areas of fighting during WWI.

The Battalion’s second mission is the dismantling of toxic and chemical ammunition dating from WWII. The dismantling facility is located at the site of conflict during WWII. During 1998 and 1999, tons were carried out on real ammunition to control the feasibility of the installation. The installation has been operational since October 1999.

The third major task calls for the support of judicial authorities in the field of terrorism and organised crime. This responsibility averages around 150 interventions a year for the EOD Battalion. Suspect devices ranging from letter bombs to car bombs are investigated and rendered safe. The unit is also in charge of post-explosion investigations. The EOD Battalion is always ready to intervene in case of a military air crash to recover ammunition and pyrotechnic elements. It can also rely on dive-bomb disposal experts for diving missions in the hinterland and the territorial water surfaces.

The unit instructs own bomb disposal experts and organises instructional courses for police forces, judicial authorities and security agents. The basic course to become an EOD operator takes one year. After five years of experience, the non-commissioned IOD officer operator follows an advanced four-month course. Then the NCO can act as an EOD team leader. In 2003, the Ministry of Defence requested that the bomb disposal school develop an EOD team leader course for foreigners to participate in. This four-month course is available to experienced EOD operators.

Belgian military experts continually advise researchers involved in programs to support humanitarian demining. Regularly, the EOD operators support Belgian universities, the Royal Military Academy and many civilian universities in their studies with the humanitarian demining domain. The EOD experts constantly test new equipment and provide help to the students, based on their field experience.

The last support provided by the Belgian military experts encompasses the technical assistance to treaty and protocol developments. Belgian Defense sends military experts and both EOD and non-EOD operators to international workshops and symposiums. During these development processes, the military experts can provide counsel to developing countries and protocol based on their field experiences.

Beginning in 1990, Belgium began requesting UN support for its humanitarian activities and informing the world of its 70 years of lessons learned.


The Battalion currently has the following 13 EOD operators abroad:

- Three military EOD operators are stationed in Kosovo to protect Belgian troops, yet the Belgian EOD experts deal daily with UXO in civilian areas.
- Four military operators EOD experts are stationed in Cambodia as technical advisers for the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC). Between 1994 and 1996, the Belgian experts were involved in the minefields. Their main task was to inform and advise, in the field, the CMAC deminers. Between 1996 and 2000, the advisers assisted in the creation of an EOD branch in CMAC with the cooperation of Dutch colleagues. Since 2000, the Belgian advisors have been alone in the support of an EOD branch. The statistics of Cambodia show that 65 percent of the accidents are due to UXO and 35 percent are due to AP mines. The intention of CMAC is to build an EOD branch able to work throughout the country.
- Two military EOD experts are deployed in the southern province of Lao, Champasak, in support of the activities of the Lao National UXO Project (UXO LAO). The Belgian advisors support all the domains, not only the technical and operational, but also human resources, material resources, finance, etc. Since 1998, Belgium has provided technical advisers to assist the operations in the province. During the 15 years of war, bombs were dropped on Lao PDR. Today it is a country covered with tons of UXO. The experience gained in Belgium since 1918 gives Belgium a good opportunity to help Lao PDR to build a long-term UXO disposal capacity to reduce the risk due to unexploded bomb live units (BLUs), bombs and other UXO.
- Four EOD operators have been deployed in Bosnia since November 2003 to reinforce the Stabilization Force (SFOR) mission. The mission of this team is to assist Bosnia in the storage, transportation and demolition of large stocks of ammunition.

Following the past experiences of Belgium’s use of military experts in humanitarian demining has an advantage, even if the humanitarian demining is normally not a military mission. When a country uses military experts to build a national EOD capacity to clear the country, the costs are substantially lower. The majority of armies with an EOD capacity developed them to support military operations. During peaceful times, this capacity is available and the operators can be used to clear the UNO on the national territory. The country does not need to pay twice to develop an EOD capacity for military operations and an EOD capacity for national territory. It is also evident that the experience gained on the national territory can also be used to support programs abroad.

Military experts usually have a military channel that gives them access to technical information. Thus, when the military experts are involved in support of the humanitarian demining, it is easier to get access to the needed technical information. Directly after a conflict, military units are regularly sent to control the peace process. The military EOD operators are able to start with the urgent clearance operations and disposal of UNO. The co-operation with other experts will only provide benefits to the humanitarian situation. A better coordination between military experts and non-military experts is also an advantage for research and development of mine action technologies with a reduction of the costs and an increase in the research involved.

Conclusion

In conclusion, AP mines are a problem, but they are unfortunately not the only problem after a conflict. Many statistics demonstrate today that UXO represent an important problem that may be larger than the AP mine problem. The experience of Belgium shows that many decades after the end of the hostilities, large quantities of UXO still remain on the ground. The demining activities of minefields and the disposal of UXO are major tasks that will take a long time. It is in the interest of the international community to take into account all available resources, included military operators. They perform the same job as the non-military operators with, in some cases, other priorities and other time schedules.

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