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OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM:

The Role of Polish Engineers in Afghanistan

The Polish Military Contingent, located at Bagram Base, 65 km from Kabul, has been contributing to peacekeeping missions within *Operation Enduring Freedom* since March 2002. In addition to the platoon's main responsibilities of engineering reconnaissance and mine clearance, the platoon is also responsible for building fortification structures, developing base infrastructure, loading and transporting constructing materials, and conducting different kinds of ground works, mainly in the surrounding area of the base.

The area surrounding Bagram Base is a very difficult area for engineering tasks. The surface of the area is flat; however, there are many hollows from the remains of firing positions, the elements of engineering barrier systems, anti-armoured vehicle ditches, craters, and wire and mine barriers. The diversity of the region, considering the

building techniques and various constructing materials that were used in the past, creates many problems for the Polish engineers. Furthermore, the structure of the ground itself creates problems. Several centimetres of ash cover the ground during the summer, while the spring and the autumn bring mud that forms into a solid shell with the extremely low winter temperatures.

The entire civilian infrastructure in the region was adjusted to support combat action. Firing positions, minefields, engineering barriers and dams are everywhere. Minefield plans and documentation are imprecise or even deliberately misleading. It is very common for actual minefields to lay several metres from the marked minefields, which often lay barren. This is a characteristic of the mine battles that were conducted several years ago in this region. Often, booby traps

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were built on the approaches to the firing positions during these battles. The battles also left behind the wreckage of vehicles and planes, abandoned combat equipment and thousands of landmines. In these conditions, it is necessary for Polish engineers to be well-prepared, properly equipped, well-regulated and highly qualified in order to succeed.

At the moment, the priorities for the Polish Engineering Platoon include mine clearance, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), minefield and road marking, reconstruction of civilian infrastructure, and water purification and distribution. Unfortunately, due to the relief of the ground, location or degree of complication, most of these tasks must be executed manually from the beginning through the end. Clearing minefields around gas stations and ammunition depots or even removing mines from under the wheels of aircraft that had to make an emergency landing in a minefield are examples of those tasks.

Checking the ground is usually done with help of tentacles and detectors. Soldiers working on minefields have anti-mine shoes that at least partially protect them from the detonation of AP mines. When the terrain allows, a mine flail is used for clearing minefields, which can clear about 250 sq m of the ground in one hour. However, there is often the necessity to prepare the terrain before and check it after sweeping. For clearing terrain of AP mines, heavy chain sweeping gear is used (Hydrena). In favourable conditions, the Hydrena can clean 700 sq m of the ground in one hour. When there is a risk of damaging the sweeping gear or it cannot be used due to the relief of the ground, bunch charges of explosives are substituted.

The occurrence of extremely large amounts of artillery, aerial and anti-aircraft ammunition, from manual grenades to scatterable mines, gas-fuel bombs, and a variety of AP and AT mines, poses an enormous threat for the Polish engineers. According to statistics, Polish engineering platoons in this region can recognize and clear areas an average of about 15 ha of mines, defuse about 300 AP mines, 20 AT mines, 60 scatterable mines of different types, 20 aerial bombs, 30 missiles and artillery shells, 30 mortar bombs and manual grenades, 80 bomb fuses of different types, 50 different ammunitions, and about 80 other dangerous items.

Despite enormous work and effort, the Bagram Base is continuously in danger. Missile or bomb attacks, ambushes and mine traps are no rarity. However, there is an atmosphere of mutual respect and eagerness for accomplishing tasks in the Polish contingent. The support of the contingent commander, the chaplain and the soldiers themselves keep spirits high during this difficult period of their lives.

**Photos clo the authors.*

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