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Humanitarian Demining in the Sultanate of Oman

Though Oman has moderate mine contamination, weather conditions have contributed to the difficulty of locating some mines. In January 2001, USCENTCOM implemented a train-the-trainer program, which complemented Oman's 15 year demining effort.

by LTC Steve Soucek and MAJ Darrell Strother

Background

Oman has a low to moderate landmine/unexploded ordnance (UXO) problem. Anti-tank (AT) and anti-personnel (AP) landmines were laid in the Dhofar region between 1964-1975 during an internal struggle with the People's Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOG, later shortened to PFLO, a communist separatist group). Both the Royal Army of Oman (RAO)—with its allies Jordan, Iran, and the United Kingdom—and the PFLO used landmines during the conflict; the RAO to support defensive positions or to interdict the separatists' movements, and the separatists to ambush the RAO and allied units.

Approximately 5000 square kms of the Dhofar district are affected by landmines/UXO left over from the conflict. The RAO and its allies used a wide range of AP landmines (US, German, Israeli, British) to support various defensive positions. According to the RAO, the majority of the mine fields were not mapped or marked, nor cleared at the conclusion of the conflict. The PFLO, supported by Marxist south Yemen and other Soviet bloc countries, used a variety of Eastern Bloc AT and AP landmines to protect their positions and to ambush RAO and allied forces. They too failed to map, mark or clear their mine fields. Heavy seasonal monsoon rains, terrain, and soil conditions have

allowed a number of these mines to migrate from their original positions, which further contributes to the difficulty of locating the mines. The RAO has plotted suspected mined areas where known defensive positions were established during the conflict and where incidents occurred in recent years.

The RAO established seven zones of suspected mined areas based on historical records of battlefield areas, unit positions, and landmine incident/accident reports. The map in Figure 1 shows the approximate boundaries of each zone.

Request for Special Assistance

In June 1999, the Sultanate of Oman requested U.S. Government assistance with their 15-year demining effort. By November 1999, the Department of State (DOS) and the Department of Defense (DoD) jointly had led a series of policy and planning visits to Oman that culminated in the Jan 2001 implementation of a U.S. integrated train-the-trainer program for the engineer cadre and mine clearing troops of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO) Sultan's Armed Forces' Engineers (SAF-E). With U.S. assistance, RAO ultimately aims to develop a model Humanitarian Demining (HD) program that combines highly trained mine clearing cadre and troops, mine detecting handlers and dogs, mechanized mine detection and/or clearance equipment, and the latest associated HD technology in a synchronized package.



As a component of the U. S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), U.S. Army Forces Central Command (USARCENT) and U.S. Special Operations Forces trained more than 70 RAO demining and medical personnel in the areas of Mine field Survey, Marking and Detection, Information Management, Mine Awareness, Quality Assurance, and Medical Skills during January-April 2001. At the completion of training, USCENTCOM donated all training detectors, survey, and protective equipment as well as the Information Management and Mine Awareness computer hardware and software to the RAO for their future training programs.

By design, DOS initiated concurrent mine detecting dog (MDD) and handler training in Jan 01. DOS plans to finish the MDD training in Nov 01, and to formally

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transfer RAO's five dog MDD force to RAO's newly trained eight man MDD handler detachment. USCENTCOM and USARCENT will conduct periodic assessment visits with the aim of helping ensure Oman has a viable, self-sustaining HD program toward the end of 2003.

The Oman HD program strategy is practical and supportable. RAO is complementing a disciplined, successful organization with enhanced technology, training, additional personnel, and proven international HD techniques, while further enhancing their HD program with USCENTCOM assistance. Oman aims to achieve a goal of 80 percent of all suspected mined areas cleared to United Nations standards within eight years. RAO will continue to cooperate and coordinate on a regular basis with the U.S. Embassy Country Team and USCENTCOM representatives to achieve their goal. Successful RAO demining efforts will also contribute to the Country Team's Mission Performance Plan goal of improving regional and peninsular stability.

Oman continues to contribute significant resources to their HD program. Emphasizing the point made in the FY01 and 02 Country plans, RAO contributed an estimated \$1.6 million annually since formation of the mine clearing troop in 1984, and for four of the interim years they doubled their contribution to an estimated \$3.2 million. RAO's current contribution is now even greater since they have added command emphasis, increased manpower, new HD kennel and office construction, and a continuous year-round demining operation. The Oman HD strategy is completely consistent

with the program goals, and will serve as a model template for Humanitarian Demining and effective U.S. engagement through training assessment and sustainment visits.

Accomplishments

RAO's key HD accomplishments to date include restructuring their Engineer School structure and curriculum to accommodate U.S. HD training, restructuring their Mine Clearing Troop and training cycle to coincide with internationally recognized standards, and creation of the National Mine Action Center (MAC) in Muscat and the Regional Mine Action Center (RMAC) in Salalah. Additionally, in May 01, RAO deployed their newly trained and equipped Mine Clearing Troop to their priority clearance area in the vicinity of Sarfait, and have since found three significant UXO's. RAO MDD training has gone well under the direct oversight of the DOS MDD contractor, RONCO. Additionally DoD, DOS, USARCENT, and the Embassy Country Team have recently concluded a mechanical mine clearing survey in the Habrut area of Dhofar. As there is likely a very low density of mines and UXO's remaining in the affected areas, the most important future progress metrics will probably address area clearance, the amount of land made available for productive use, km of road cleared, and the number of mine fields identified, mapped, and marked.

Program Status and Conclusion

Mine clearing operations are ongoing, and RAO is still refining their

organizational structure. The structure essentially evolved from a unit capable of conducting combat engineering clearing procedures only, comprised of 40 deminers and 20 support troops, to that of a complex, multifunctional HD unit. RAO now has 70 soldiers dedicated to accomplishing all HD functions, a core of trained demining cadre, and 12 medical personnel that are trained to handle blast injuries typically caused by UXO and mine incidents (medics will deploy with every demining troop rotation cycle). The demining sections will serve two-year rotations, and the information management, mine awareness, and dog handling personnel volunteered for 6-year service periods prior to starting their specialized training. Future DoD training will result from operational demining training deficiencies identified during USCENTCOM periodic training assessment visits. ■

**All photos courtesy of CENTCOM*

Biographies

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■ (L-R) Clearance training. Mine detector training. Mine dog team.

