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Interviews with HMA Directors: Major General J.M. Cowan

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The HALO Trust

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James Cowan is CEO of The HALO Trust (HALO), a leading NGO clearing the debris of war with over 8,500 staff in 24 countries. At a time of unprecedented, man-made humanitarian crises, HALO’s work has never been more important.

James was a soldier for 30 years, serving in Germany, Northern Ireland, Africa, Hong Kong, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He commanded his regiment, The Black Watch, in Iraq in 2004 during fighting in Basra and subsequently around Fallujah. He was back in Iraq in 2006–2007, again in Basra. He took command of Task Force Helmand and served in Afghanistan during 2009–2010. He was subsequently Head of Counter Terrorism in the British Ministry of Defence and led the planning for the 2012 Olympics military security operation. His last job in the British Army was as General Officer Commanding the 3rd (U.K.) Division.

Cowan: Major General J.M. Cowan

1. In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing the conventional weapons destruction (CWD) and humanitarian mine action (HMA) community today (funding, strategic planning, governance, development approaches, staffing, political interference, networking of organizations within uncertain political and external environments, etc.); how are they typically overcome?

As we enter our third decade of work, the mine action sector faces two challenges: first, we need to fulfill the promise to the millions of forgotten people who continue to live in fear from explosive remnants of war (ERW). Secondly, we must adapt to the current and future humanitarian requirements caused by war; far more people are being harmed by this second category.

Legacy contamination. Landmines remain as dangerous as ever to the 60 million people affected by them worldwide, restricting access to land, livelihoods, and endangering the lives of those who live nearby. Despite this continued danger, funding of legacy mine action programs remains a challenge. We must respect competing humanitarian priorities, without allowing donor fatigue, or diminishing foreign aid budgets to damage our work.

The Landmine Free 2025 (http://landminefree2025.org) campaign seeks to change this narrative and reinvigorate support to achieve completion in as many places as possible by 2025. Completion is possible and achievable with the right financial and political commitment from both donor and affected states, but will take innovative thinking and agility to achieve. As such, we are exploring innovative solutions that have been developed in other sectors, such as alternative funding mechanisms and social financing that may provide additional support to mine action.

Improvised explosive devices (IED). In addition to legacy mine problems, the mine action sector is also confronting new contamination in many regions. IEDs are not new, and in the majority of cases, they fall under the globally agreed definition of landmines. However, the new use of these weapons and massive scale of IED contamination in the Middle East and other regions, leading to a considerable increase in casualties, give reason to develop new techniques, training, and methods to meet the evolving nature of modern landmines.

Urban clearance. Linked to the proliferation of improvised mines and the changing nature of warfare is the requirement for large-scale, urban rubble clearance and reconstruction. The physical challenge of destroyed buildings, reinforced concrete, and booby-trapping create significant technical challenges on a daunting scale for mine clearance operators. HALO has begun to adapt to meet these challenges by developing new survey techniques for urban areas. We are adapting machines used for urban clearance in Afghanistan and other contexts, and developing pilot projects in Afghanistan to trial new techniques for clearance.

Neutral humanitarian space. The wars of the 21st century are more likely to take place in urban populated areas, where the lines between peace and formal war, and between civilian and combatant are increasingly fluid. With numerous non-state actors in communities, negotiating access becomes an ongoing process rather than a precursor to engagement. HMA operators must be flexible and nimble to be able to adapt, and change areas of operation swiftly in line with changing conditions, while protecting the safety of staff and communities.

2. Transitioning from the British Army to an international non-governmental organization (NGO), how did your past work prepare you for The HALO Trust, what lessons learned have been the most valuable for you?

During my time as a soldier I fought in Northern Ireland, Iraq, and Afghanistan and served in many other places.
I began my service in Berlin, protecting it from the Soviets—the war that, thankfully, never was. I’ve learnt several lessons from that experience:

- First, the British Army of 1989 was geared for a conventional fight against the Warsaw Pact. Now it has changed out of all recognition to deal with the much more complex threats of terrorism and cyber warfare, while still being able to protect the UK against a resurgent Russia. There are parallels with mine action, which still has a legacy threat to clear, but I don’t think the sector has dared to change at the same pace, and it needs to catch up.
- Second, the British Army teaches leadership—I see a sector afflicted by management speak. I’d like to see more leadership and a clearer sense of direction.
- And third, the British Army teaches Mission Command, by which it means trusting those who can be trusted. Mine action could usefully do the same.

3. During your career in the military, how do you feel explosive hazards clearance has evolved over the years?

War is, at its heart, an attempt to out-maneuver your enemy. To achieve this, you need to move without friction, breaching natural and man-made obstacles. Conversely, you must limit your enemy’s capacity to maneuver by creating obstacles. In the 1980s, clearing and laying landmines played a major part in this, but as war became more three-dimensional, the use of landmines became less relevant—helicopters, insurgents, and cyber warriors aren’t very worried by landmines. Now it is the IED that dominates and, along with the proliferation of small arms, the mine action sector needs to reinvent itself to counter these two threats.

4. Going forward, what opportunities do you see for HALO and other HMA NGOs, and how well-prepared do you think the wider HMA/CWD community is for the future?

We need to be better at forecasting and responding to the world of 2049, not 1989. In my view, growing populations, urbanization, competition for land, climate change, biodiversity, non-state conflict, and threats to the rules-based international order will predominate. Mine action is good at dealing with the world as it was in 1989 or in 1997 when the Ottawa Treaty was signed, but that is not a recipe for future success. We are in danger of entering our anecdotage. We are in danger of entering our anecdotage, addict...