

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

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Volume 23  
Issue 1 *The Journal of Conventional Weapons  
Destruction Issue 23.1*

Article 5

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April 2019

## Interviews With HMA Directors: Allan Vosburgh

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### Recommended Citation

Vosburgh, Allan R. (2019) "Interviews With HMA Directors: Allan Vosburgh," *Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol23/iss1/5>

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# ALLAN VOSBURGH



Allan Vosburgh is the Chief Executive Officer of the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation since 2016. Vosburgh is a retired U.S. Army Colonel and former U.S. Army Master Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technician with over 40 years of experience in munitions stockpile management, explosive safety, EOD, munitions testing, weapons of mass destruction, training, technology assessments, and humanitarian mine action (HMA). Before retiring from the Army in 2005, Vosburgh served in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict) in the Pentagon, where he provided oversight of EOD, HMA technology, and Special Operations Ammunition. Other assignments included Ammunition Officer for the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations/G-3, Commander, 3rd Ordnance Battalion

(EOD), and Director of (Ammunition) Materiel Testing at Jefferson Proving Ground, Indiana. He served as a Department of Army Civilian from 2009 to 2016 as U.S. Army, Pacific, G-4, Chief of Munitions. Vosburgh holds Master of Science degrees from both the National Defense University and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. He worked as a volunteer with Golden West from 2006 to 2016.

**1. In your opinion, what are the main conventional weapons destruction (CWD) and humanitarian mine action (HMA) obstacles faced by non-governmental organizations (NGO) operating in the Pacific (funding, strategic planning, governance, development approaches, staffing, political interference, networking of organizations within uncertain political and external environments, etc.); how are they typically overcome?**

The Pacific encompasses a vast amount of area and a number of diverse HMA challenges. Golden West operations currently engages the Solomon Islands, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, all with very different needs and challenges. Funding is always a challenge and government donors are subject to short-term budgets in the face of long-term requirements and commitments needed to build capacity to overcome HMA challenges. Donor fatigue is a reality and can have substantial impacts to organizational strategic planning, especially when you must rely on limited donors.

Golden West is different from many other Pacific HMA NGOs, who focus on clearance of landmines or unexploded ordnance (UXO). Golden West does not generally conduct clearances, but concentrates on technology and training that builds long-term capacity. Golden West operates the Explosive Harvesting Program, funded by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), and in partnership with Cambodia's Mine Action Center (CMAC), recycling suitable munitions and creating explosive charges used by all clearance NGOs in Cambodia to destroy landmines and UXO.

The extended nature of Golden West training engagements requires cooperation from national authorities and recognition of the value added by the capacity we provide. Asian cultural values are often at odds to a quick approach, and it can take many years to gain trust and willing support.

The customers are also very different, and these differences have serious implications for how HMA programs evolve. In the Solomon Islands, we provide International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) EOD training for the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force. Their EOD teams are now well trained and have the skills and capacity to sustain a safe and effective program, but working in the Solomon Islands is difficult. The remote nature of the islands, the physical conditions of heat, rain, mud, and tropical jungles, helps make it a challenge just to work there.

In Vietnam, we work primarily with Vietnamese Provincial Military Commands (PMC), building EOD skills supporting both emergency responses and battle area clearances. Golden West's PMC IMAS EOD training is focused on building long-term, sustainable capabilities that can take over when proactive clearance is done and Vietnam assumes all explosive remnants of war (ERW) missions. We are now focused on making the PMCs capable of safely and effectively managing the inevitable residual UXO without assistance.

**2. Transitioning from the U.S. Army to an NGO, how did your past work prepare you for Golden West, and what lessons learned have been the most valuable for you?**

Many years of military service provided a solid technical background in ammunition management and EOD. When assigned to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of

Defense (Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict), I worked closely with Department of Defense Humanitarian Demining Research and Development Program (HD R&D) at Fort Belvoir, VA. There I had the opportunity to interact with a wide variety of HMA NGOs and programs. The excellent work that HD R&D does within the HMA sector was a great introduction to different organizations and different approaches to the work we do. After retiring from the Army, I volunteered with Golden West for 10 years and got the chance to really know the organization before taking on the job of CEO. In terms of lessons learned, NGOs aren't so different from military organizations I served or commanded over the years. You try to find the best people you can, provide them the resources they need, provide them clear guidance, and then get out of their way and let them do the job.

**3. During your past 13 years with Golden West, how do you feel explosive hazards clearance has evolved since you became a civilian?**

Mine action's strategic environment continues to shift and evolve. Since 2005, when donors primarily focused on landmine clearance issues, we have seen growth of concerns regarding cluster munitions and a growing interest in physical security and stockpile management. The days when the large foreign mine action groups had plenty of funded work in clearing mines are largely ending and diversity of missions within the sector have become much more competitive. I am a bit disappointed that more American NGOs have not been created to support HMA. The United States is by far the biggest donor to worldwide ERW operations, yet the sector continues to be dominated by foreign HMA organizations.

In many areas, we are finally to a point where attention is shifting from proactive to reactive responses, and to examination of methods to manage residual ERW. This requires more attention to building real capacity in national programs now dominated by international NGOs, and preparing national programs to assume unilateral responsibility for HMA.

**4. Going forward, what opportunities do you see for Golden West and other HMA NGOs, and how well-prepared do you think the community is for the future?**

Sadly, wars continue to add ERW around the world, so I doubt there will be any shortage of opportunities for the sector in the foreseeable future. The challenge will continue to be finding adequate funding, and finding highly qualified people who want to do HMA NGO work. My concern is that a generation of military EOD operators have been forced to focus on the improvised explosive device-fight at the cost of detailed technical knowledge of ammunition and explosives. The sector badly needs EOD and ammunition experts with more than a superficial knowledge of munitions, who can also be diplomats, often working independently to train and mentor

technicians and to advise host nation technical and government agencies.

**5. While working in HMA, what experience, lesson, or event has impacted you in your role as CEO the most? (This could be a travel experience, people met/worked with, challenge, etc.)**

I first met Senior Colonel Nguyen Quang Bieu, from the People's Army of Vietnam when he attended an HD R&D HMA Workshop in 2003. At that time, he was assigned to the External Relations Department (ERD) of the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense. Over the course of that week, we had the opportunity to talk and learned that we had served our respective countries in roughly the same places during 1971–1972. That war was in the distant past, but Bieu was the first former adversary with whom I was comfortable discussing it. I invited them to my home where my wife, Be, cooked Vietnamese food for all of us. Bieu and I became fast friends and we did our best to continue to keep up our discussion.

Sometime after I retired from the U.S. Army and joined Golden West, I learned that Bieu was also retiring from the Army of Vietnam. At the time, we were struggling to establish an HMA program in Vietnam and having little luck soliciting support from the ERD or other Vietnamese agencies. I suggested he might consider coming to work with Golden West.

Bieu became Golden West's Vietnam Country Representative and soon was the key to gaining access in Vietnam. We worked together for 10 years, and he never failed to provide good counsel, even in the face of unremitting frustration. He helped guide the organization through a series of growing pains and helped me understand how to negotiate the intricacies of Vietnamese bureaucracy.

Most of all, he helped me learn that former enemies can truly be friends. His essential humanity impressed and gave me hope that all the other wars since have the potential for some sort of reconciliation. Bieu suddenly passed away in early February 2019 and was honored as a hero of Vietnam during a formal state funeral. He was my personal hero, because despite fighting serious illness, he stayed active in Golden West and our programs to aid Vietnam's recovery from ERW. His passing was not just a loss to Golden West but to the entire HMA sector. ©