*In this issue of* The Journal, *we feature interviews with two officials from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the US Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), who recount their careers and experiences working with conventional weapons destruction (CWD) programs.*

# AN INTERVIEW WITH John Stevens

John Stevens is a retired PM/WRA Program Manager with extensive experience running multi-million-dollar conventional weapons destruction (CWD) programs in Vietnam, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, and Ukraine. Since December 2014, Stevens has been re-employed as a Senior CWD Advisor with PM/WRA. In this capacity, he conducted fresh CWD assessments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Guinea-Bissau, Lao PDR, Senegal, Serbia, and South Korea.

## HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED IN HUMANITARIAN MINE ACTION?

*The United States Information Agency (USIA), where I served as a Watch Officer in its Operations Center, was consolidated with the US Department of State in 1999. Selected USIA officers were given the opportunity to compete for public diplomacy positions at the Department. For me, the most interesting vacancy was at the Office of the President and Secretary of State for Global Humanitarian Demining. I interviewed, was picked, and plunged immediately into helping publicize US policy on landmines and the accomplishments of the US Humanitarian Demining Program—already the world's largest—and to travel to mine-affected countries to observe and learn. After PM/WRA was established in 2003, consolidating all of the Department's demining, small arms/light weapons (SALW) destruction, and related policymaking, I was asked to manage our explosive remnants of war (ERW) programs in Vietnam in addition to continuing my public diplomacy duties. After several years, I attended the National War College, where I received a master's degree in National Security Strategy. Upon graduating I returned to the State Department, served for six months on the US Horn of Africa counter-piracy program, and then returned to PM/WRA where I took over management of our CWD programs in the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal, Sudan (before South Sudan's independence), Somalia, and Mozambique. I was then asked to manage our CWD programs in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and, beginning in 2013, Ukraine as well. I retired in early 2014. In late 2014, PM/WRA hired me on an intermittent basis to help assess our CWD programs in Colombia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guinea-Bissau, Lao PDR, and Senegal, and to assess South Korea's brief resumption of demining in its half of the Demilitarized Zone. I continue to advise PM/WRA as needed.*


The author at a HALO Trust humanitarian demining site in Colombia, 2015.
*All images courtesy of the author.*

*When PM/WRA was created in 2003, its mandate also included the destruction of other countries' at-risk SALW, including man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), the provision of physical security and munitions stockpile management (PSSM) assistance, and helping other countries safely clear ammunition that polluted communities following catastrophic explosions at some of their "dangerous depots." In addition to the brief executive level introduction to landmine clearance that I and other PM/WRA program managers received from the Department of Defense's Humanitarian Demining Training Center, we also received introductory training on PSSM from such professional military education institutions as the NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany. In summary, PM/WRA's mission confronts all manner of conventional weapons threats, not just landmines and ERW.*

## DID YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT LANDMINES BEFORE YOU TOOK YOUR FIRST JOB AT THE US DEPARTMENT OF STATE?

*When I served in the US Army in the early 1970s, we were taught to use Claymore mines and were given the chance to detonate some during Infantry Advanced Individual Training. I was astounded at how powerful these mines were, far more than the hand grenades we were also taught to use. But it was not until I served for two years as an Observer in the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO) peacekeeping organization in the Sinai Desert that I learned just how dangerous, ubiquitous, and persistent landmines and ERW can be. We were advised that the dangers in the Sinai might still include some wooden anti-personnel "shoe box" mines emplaced by the Ottoman Turkish Army during World War I. I never saw one. But I did recognize that vast numbers of modern anti-vehicle mines and ERW dating back to Israel's War of Independence from 1948–1949, 1956 Suez Crisis, 1967 Six-Day War, 1967–1970 War of Attrition, and 1973 Yom Kippur War (October War) posed the greatest actual threats! Many of the mines visibly littered the desert, where the wind shifted their locations and repeatedly covered and uncovered them with sand.*

## WHAT ROLE DOES POLICY PLAY IN ADVANCING HUMANITARIAN MINE ACTION AND IN DENYING ARMS AND AMMUNITION TO CRIMINALS AND TERRORISTS, AND HOW HAS THE UNITED STATES CONTRIBUTED TO SHAPING THESE POLICIES?

*US policy on the use of landmines and cluster munitions, and in helping other nations rid themselves of these "hidden killers," is in strict adherence to Amended Protocol II to the* Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, *adopted in 1996, making it the first landmine treaty in history, and to which the United States is a party. On the kinetic side, this means US armed forces uphold its requirements during conflicts. On the humanitarian side, the United States leads the way in helping other countries clear landmines and ERW that endanger their populations. This assistance even covers US-origin ERW in the Pacific region dating back to World War II. In addition, our CWD programs help countries safely destroy their stocks of aging, unstable, and excess arms and ammunition to keep them out of the hands of criminals and terrorists, and to prevent catastrophic unexpected explosions at munitions sites whose humanitarian and political impacts often surpass those created by persistent landmines and ERW. In addition to the humanitarian good done by the US CWD program, the national security of the United States and of its allies and friends are also reinforced.*

## WHAT DID YOU LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AS PROGRAM MANAGER FOR VIETNAM?

*To be humble and leave my assumptions at the door. During my assessment visits to Vietnam, we funded a complex multi-million-dollar pilot Landmine Impact Survey in six of the central provinces in addition to funding battle area clearance (BAC), mine risk education (now called Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE)), and survivor assistance.[1] During this time I discovered that it was ERW—usually cluster munitions—and not landmines that posed the greatest threat in those six provinces. I also believed that some of the EORE we funded was well-intended but probably of little lasting value, and that the sites identified by the provincial authorities to be cleared were not always sites that posed the greatest immediate threat to local inhabitants (and in one case would have necessitated the complete removal of a large cemetery). I learned that a significant number of explosive devices, whether of Soviet, Chinese, or US origin, ranging from hand grenades to rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, artillery shells, and aerial bombs—both unitary and cluster—had failed to detonate over the course of the Vietnam War and were still killing Vietnamese people and hindering Vietnam's agriculture sector and infrastructure development in the provinces that needed that development most. This is unfortunately still the case even today, though our programs have successfully reduced the number of accidental deaths and cleared thousands of acres of land for agricultural and infrastructure development, according to the needs of the local communities.*

*Once, at the end of a long day in the field, I found myself at a beach overlooking the beautiful South China Sea, or, as the Vietnamese call it, the East Sea. It struck me that as an episodic visitor to a country where I could not speak or read the language and therefore could not always perceive where the national and provincial authorities priorities might conflict with each other's, I knew as much about the local context and Vietnam's own deep-seated concerns as I knew about what was going on with the fish in front of me. That beachside revelation remained with me even when I was tasked to manage our CWD programs in Africa and years later in Eastern Europe.*

"...I knew as much about the local context and Vietnam's own deep-seated concerns as I knew about what was going on with the fish in the East Sea."

## MINE ACTION IS OFTEN LINKED TO DEVELOPMENT. ARE THERE ANY OTHER SPECIALIZED FIELDS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE MORE CLOSELY COLLABORATE WITH MINE ACTION (I.E., EMERGENCY RELIEF, ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE, AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, ETC.)?

*Years ago, when the idea of integrating mine action with development was first raised, it ran into institutional skepticism. The concern was that humanitarian demining (HD) would get encumbered with all sorts of non-kinetic responsibilities and suffer from a diversion of funds and distractions imposed by other humanitarian and development assistance requirements. In fact, there has always been room for other disciplines to work side by side with HD and BAC, and for the greater good. I cannot imagine a scenario in which the HD/BAC communities would not want to keep medical practitioners, aid workers, emergency responders, public works engineers for municipal water, sewage, and power systems, and farmers apprised of where they have cleared the land from hidden killers or where clearance remains to be done, or to work with other professions to help prioritize clearance tasks, just as a doctor triages patients after a major accident. And I cannot imagine a situation where medical practitioners and others would not immediately alert the HD/BAC specialists when they encounter explosive devices that hinder their essential work. The same goes for environmental protection or remediation, and agricultural development. If* The Journal's *readers examine PM/WRA's* To Walk the Earth in Safety's *annual reports (https://bit.ly/3Xd3u68), they will see that years ago the US CWD program initiated a holistic approach in which multiple sectors outside of HD/BAC have been engaged and thereby even more empowered to render all types of assistance to conflict-impacted populations. Encouraged strongly by the Department of State's internal planning processes for foreign assistance, we strive to harmonize our CWD programs with the priorities of the Department's Regional Bureaus, country desks, and US Embassies worldwide.*

*Social norms in CWD have matured too. Originally, HD and BAC were almost entirely conducted by men. Women have since been integrated into the HD/BAC labor forces. They have learned and maintained the same high level of diligence and expertise as their male counterparts. There has been no reduction at all in work quality or overall performance. Quite the contrary! Since it was established in 2003, PM/WRA has*


The author at a battle area clearance collection pit, Quang Binh Province, Vietnam, 2007.

*strongly encouraged its implementing partners to recruit women as well as men. To their credit, our partners have done so and not just because PM/WRA desired it, but because their own institutional ethos called for equal employment opportunity as well. As a result, demining assistance is more effective by ensuring it benefits all segments of society, thereby producing greater positive outcomes for recipient communities, and providing American taxpayers with a better return on their investment. In countries like Tajikistan, Colombia, and Vietnam, mixed-gender demining teams are setting new standards and influencing attitudes in their communities.*

## WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS OR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF HMA OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER? WHAT HAVE BEEN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS?

*The Department of Defense's Humanitarian Demining Research and Development's successful creation, testing, and deployment of the HSTAMIDS dual head detector in 2006 (https://bit.ly/3WXsk8V). The HSTAMIDS detector combines metal detecting with ground penetrating radar, and its preset algorithms can determine if a signal designates the presence of specific types of landmines or merely signals a harmless piece of metal shrapnel, belt buckle, or other piece of non-threatening metal debris (false positives). It has been a tremendous labor saver for the demining community. Admittedly, given the sophisticated technology behind these detectors, they are more expensive than conventional metal detectors, and the deminers who use them require additional training to extract the full benefit from these devices. These factors and costs may prevent some smaller demining organizations from adding HSTAMIDS to their tool kits.*

*Just as armed drones have revolutionized warfare, small quadcopter drones equipped with video cameras and with metal detectors are likely to help further speed mine and ERW detection, and possibly the detection of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).*

*Looking ahead, drones augmented by artificial intelligence might help to make non-technical survey (NTS) and technical survey even more accurate, and therefore more trustworthy, ultimately freeing up precious funds for clearing confirmed hazard areas (CHA). Of course, the extra cost of acquiring this technology, training deminers to use it efficiently, and the ability to sustain the quadcopters and their sensors in the field with maintenance, may be limiting factors for some demining organizations.*

"Just as armed drones have revolutionized warfare, small quadcopter drones equipped with video cameras and with metal detectors are likely to help further speed mine and ERW detection..."

## CONVERSELY, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES FACING THE US CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS DESTRUCTION PROGRAMS' EFFORTS TODAY?

*The first challenge that comes to mind is the use by some non-state actors of landmines, usually improvised, that have little or no metal content. This has been a big problem in Colombia, for example. In the case of minimal metal mines, the deminer and deminer's detection equipment[2] must be properly trained and calibrated, respectively, to pick up a very weak signal. But some metal detectors may not have the sensitivity to be calibrated for these subtle metallic signatures. As for non-metal mines, no, repeat no, metal detection can find them. In this latter case, the employment of mine detection dogs (MDDs) would be helpful, but only if the climate, terrain, and foliage would not constrain the MDDs or their human handlers, and if proper veterinarian care was available.*

"In short, there is still no one 'silver bullet' that will replace all of the currently available, proven devices in the deminer's toolbox."

*Also, IEDs with or without booby traps are a threat that will remain as long as warfare exists. Because of their irregular nature and varying metal signatures, they can complicate and add significant risk to demining and BAC.*

*In short, there is still no one "silver bullet" that will replace all of the currently available, proven devices in the deminer's toolbox.*

## AS MINE ACTION EVOLVED AND MATURED, WAS THERE ANYTHING THAT SURPRISED YOU, EITHER REGARDING THE SCOPE OF THE WORK CHANGING OR THE FIELD SHIFTING FOCUS TO ADDRESS DIFFERENT CHALLENGES?

*I am gratified by the degree to which nongovernmental demining organizations, most of which are PM/WRA implementing partners, have also recognized the threat, and frankly the opportunities, to expand their life-saving services and develop the expertise to safely destroy at-risk SALW, including MANPADS and ATGMs, and provide PSSM or weapons and ammunition management services. These include: renovating or building new munitions storage facilities, ranging from robust arms storerooms in police, gendarmerie, and military facilities, or entirely new, weather-resistant munitions storage depots with proper spacing to reduce the chance of explosions in one building spreading or daisy chaining to other buildings; providing close circuit TV systems in some cases and strong locks; the means and the space to enable fork lifts to stack ammunition more safely than humans alone; and the provision of robust perimeter fencing, electric alarms, lighting, and guard posts, augmented by stricter accessibility protocols. Learning proper storage of various types of ammunition and fuzes, separating them to International Ammunition Technical Guidelines standards, is also included in many PM/WRA's PSSM management initiatives.*

*One area of HD and BAC that still suffers is from host nation institutional suspicion of NTS, no matter who carries it out, being efficacious enough to enable a suspected mine field or battle area to be accurately and safely declared mine free. There are several reasons for this reluctance to accept NTS. One reason is the understandable suspicion of some local officials and national mine action authorities to sign off on an area being mine free based on NTS alone, without any technical survey. But who can blame them for not wanting to risk their careers, let alone the lives of their fellow citizens by embracing an approach that relies on people's memories and fears even when there has never been an actual casualty in an area that has no confirmed hazards? The other end of the continuum regarding resistance to NTS is what PM/WRA has characterized as the "self-licking ice cream cone" syndrome—meaning some host nation authorities are reluctant to agree that even a CHA, which has undergone full, careful clearance, really is clear, because then the foreign demining assistance, to include salaries for locally-hired deminers, provision of 4x4 vehicles, rent for housing and field offices, and so forth will cease.*

*This phenomenon in foreign assistance is surely not limited to the mine action and BAC sectors and will probably always exist in some form. It is up to donor governments and private donors to confront these challenges and diplomatically but firmly resist giving in, particularly when funds are so urgently needed to tackle genuine hazards elsewhere.*

## IS THERE ANY PARTICULAR THREAT OR ISSUE THAT WORRIES YOU?

*Yes. The threat posed by criminals and terrorists acquiring MANPADS and ATGMS is number one on my list of CWD concerns. Since PM/WRA was established in 2003, it has led the US Government's interagency MANPADS Task Force (MTF) to destroy these weapons whose powerful lethality is so disproportionate to their compact sizes and ease of portability. Fortunately, the MTF, in concert with governments worldwide, has made real progress in permanently subtracting tens of thousands of these dangerous weapons outside government control or otherwise at risk of illicit diversion from the threat equation, enabling partner governments to better manage their own legitimate stockpiles, and safeguarding global aviation in the process. But as extraordinary as the MTF's work has been year after year, significant dangers remain. MANPADS and ATGM removal are Sisyphean tasks that the MTF continues to shoulder without tiring because the stakes are so high. We must never forget that a MANPADS was used to assassinate the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi in 1994 as they flew back together to convene in Kigali, Rwanda's capital. Just as surely as the assassin's bullet that killed the Archduke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Sarajevo in 1914 was the spark that ignited World War I, so the MANPADS attack that downed the business jet carrying the leaders of Rwanda and Burundi triggered the Rwandan genocide. Terrorist groups that emerged following that genocide continue to murder innocent civilians in the eastern region of the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo to this day.*

*It has been an honor to be involved with the US CWD program that has done and continues to do so much good so that people may walk the earth in safety.*

*See endnotes next page*

*The views expressed in this interview are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the US State Department, US Government, or the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery.*

**An Interview with John Stevens**


1. "Pictorial Report on Some Humanitarian Mine Action Projects in Vietnam That Are Supported by the US Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement," US Department of State Archive, May 1, 2007, https://bit.ly/3AzGDZA.
2. "US Equipment for Vietnam," US Department of State Archive, January 9, 2007, https://bit.ly/4fNu7pD.