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Ronco Executives Talk About Demining Integration and the IMAS Contract

An Interview with Lawrence Crandall, Stephen Edelmann and A. David Lundberg

By Margaret Busé, MAIC

Can you give me a brief history of how Ronco got started with demining?

Stephen Edelmann: We started working internationally in 1980. In the late '80s, we won an open competition to assist the U.S. government in running a humanitarian assistance program in war-affected Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. Part of that program was training Afghans on the use of pack animals so that they could bring supplies over the mountains. When that program was done, we suggested to the U.S. Embassy that they try a pilot program using mine-detecting dogs and to approach the Thai Army, who had a program, to contribute to the Afghanistan war effort. That was done, and the Thais contributed 14 dogs and trainers. We have been involved in demining for over 12 years, probably longer than anyone in the field.

Can you tell me some of the challenges in setting up a successful demining program?

Edelmann: They range from logistics to cultural. Wherever we go, we are going into a difficult environment because it is post conflict and that requires innovation on our part. We have no external support and have to rely on ourselves to set up facilities, procurement, security and administration.

Lawrence Crandall: Historically, the challenges have changed over time. Initially, for the Afghan program, the challenge was to get the U.S. government to agree to fund the first humanitarian demining program because there were no policy precedents, guidelines or experienced personnel in the bureaucracy. The only demining the U.S. military had done was for tactical and military purposes. Humanitarian activities were not to be found. The challenge was trying to resolve a very serious issue. There was a multi-billion dollar humanitarian program to assist the Afghans, but a lot of the people we were training were being killed or maimed by mines. We were seeing our investments in these people lost. Washington had no sympathy. There was no lobby; there were no handbooks that showed you how to do it, and a conservative bureaucracy was afraid of it. We are essentially picking up a piece of our own Bosnia operation and moving it to Albania. Finding housing, medical supplies, food, transport—everything you need for this type of operation—is part of our concern. We must import Bosnian deminers into Albania because there are no trained in-country personnel available. Anytime you are working in the developing world, it is difficult. The biggest challenge we face is building and developing indigenous capacity. It was easy to do in Kuwait, which was a huge operation, and it was easy to bring in expats and machinery; do the job and leave. Building indigenous capacity to leave behind, that is what gets difficult. You have to affect both training and attitudinal changes. For instance, it is typical to hear that Muslims won’t work with dogs. That is simply not true when you get them exposed to the use of dogs. When we went to Mozambique, we were told by a number of people that there would be no way we would get them to use dogs because the Portuguese use dogs as police dogs and attack dogs. You just have to overcome these stereotypes. Ronco has been able to overcome this because we started as a development firm. We have a history working in the developing world, so we know how to work in that environment, and we brought our expertise to demining. It is, initially, the same. You are just dealing with a different end product: You are developing deminers, dogs, logistics, people and medicine.

How do you monitor the success or difficulties of your established programs once you have left a country?

Edelmann: With the Afghan program, we sent people back periodically for a number of years to monitor the dogs and the training. In Rwanda, we were tasked with incorporating a mine dog program into the military, which is winding down. We will probably use
the same tactic there. We will send people back to monitor the quality, training, etc. Our approach is to
wean ourselves from the program as quickly as possible consistent with the ability for our counter-
parts to take over. The Afghan program is doing great six years after we have left. That is the key. Can you go
back three, four, five years later and see what is
operating successfully? We left the Afghans with the
capacity not only to function efficiently and effec-
tively in the field, but also from a financial standpoint.
This ability allowed them to approach donors with
confidence. One of the reasons is that donors can see
where their money is going from the financial sys-
tem that we helped them set up. In a donor’s mind,
that is a significant point. We try to establish a com-
petency technically but also efficient administration.
Which country you are working in and what their
requirements are also determines what you need to
do. You may be at one end of the spectrum, like the
Afghan program where you are setting up everything,
the opposite end, like in Namibia where you are
only doing basic demining.

Crandall: In Afghanistan, we created an NGO; in
Rwanda, a government capacity was created. In the
Balkans, RONCO helped develop three commercial
companies, and they are operating and bidding on
projects on their own and, in some cases, becoming
part of our competition and sometimes our partners as
well.

Edelmann: Our clients, for instance, like the U.S.
Department of State, determine these tasks. Colabo-
ratively, we come up with a program that works.
In the Balkans, we had to set up three private
companies because the government, at the time, of-
ered us little choice. The Bosnian-Croat side had
no working government, the Serbs were considered out-
laws, i.e. Muslims, like many others, were in dis-
array—this is what the situation was like in 1996. An
NGO didn’t seem feasible because of insuperable
regulations. So, we decided to develop private com-
panies. The situation determines what we do.

Does RONCO just set up indigenous capacity, or
do you actively get tasked to remove mines?

Lundberg: It's a little bit of both. In Rwanda and
Afghanistan, we were tasked with specific jobs. On
the Kosovo-Albanian border, we were tasked with
taking mines from the border and not to worry
about building indigenous capacity. In the case of
Mozambique, we cleared 2,200 km of roads.

Crandall: We are in the development business and
started as a development business. We added
demining in 1989. Demining is demining, as far as
we are concerned. We build private sector enter-
prises, and we undertake agriculture and other develop-
ment projects. We are demining as a tool to open the
door for education, agriculture and other sectors. You
are looking at people that did it for over 30 thirty years,
as we are talking from experience. The people who
depend on us to make their farm fields and
schoolyards safe would lose if we tried to integrate.

Edelmann: Many of the NGOs believe in the inte-
grated approach to humanitarian
demining. Demining, mine
awareness and victim
assistance are all aspects
that should go on
simultaneously and all be
incorporated for
humanitarian demining
to be successful. How does
RONCO, which specializes in
only one aspect, navigate
this approach?

Crandall: Integrated
development, which is what your talk-
king about, is a concept that has
been played with in the development world for about
30 to 40 years. It is rather long run. Many of the NGOs
have taken on this integrated approach as a sort of
manner. There are better and more proven
approaches. Trying to integrate all aspects under one
organization just can't happen, and, if it does, it is
under extraordinarily high cost. We found, as an in-
tegration and myself as an individual, that comments
about integrated mine action are suspect. Traditional
integrated development practices arose from differ-
ent development experiences than demining in post
conflict situations. While the client rules, we prefer
to market simpler, cheaper and demonstrably work-
able solutions.

Edelmann: It is one of those concepts that sounds
great. Why don't we just integrate it? The
integration factor becomes the goal, and you lose sight
of everything that you are trying to get done and ac-
complish—like saving lives.
[and] funding. If you want to call that an integrated approach to demining, that is what we do. That is already a complex package.

How did RONCO get into using dogs as their primary element? Crandall: RONCO got started with dogs in Afghanistan. During the Soviet invasion, to take equipment into the country would have meant the Soviet airplanes would have destroyed it. You needed a technology that would not draw a lot of notice so what you were doing. We knew that the U.S. Army had spent a great deal of time working with the Thai army, who was working with dogs in demining along the Cambodian borders. We needed a low cost, efficient technology, and dogs were the answer. We contacted the Thai army and negotiated to pick up their handlers and dogs and flew back to Pakistan in what was then a covert operation.

Edelmans: Dogs are just one important part of our tool kit. We are using flags and other equipment to clear vegetation. There is a perception around the world that RONCO is dogs. That is true, but it is only one element to our operation. Whenever possible, we also integrate manual deminers and machinery.

There is a lot of debate regarding dog use vs. manual demining. Many people are suspect of dog use in demining. Crandall: We assume you are referring to productivity. We don't agree with that. Handicap International went into our operation in Afghanistan and took a look at our data on dogs. In the worst case, dogs were found to be two other dogs in the world trained on trip wires. The way we train our dogs and handlers is unique. It remains the best approach from our perspective. Like explosive vapor signatures, tripwires create an acoustical signature that can be detected.

Edelmans: Also, our dogs are trained on trip wires. There are not any other dogs in the world trained on trip wires. The way we train our dogs and handlers is unique. It remains the best approach from our perspective. Like explosive vapor signatures, tripwires create an acoustical signature that can be detected.

Lundberg: Invariably, when we hire a new deminer, the dogs may put them off! After working with us, they won't go into a mine field without a dog.

Edelmans: How do you demine a reinforced concrete bridge or building? Detectors are essentially useless. An integrated team of manual deminers and dogs, in our experience, is the most cost effective, safe and speediest method.

Lundberg: You have to remember there are RONCO dogs and other dogs out there. The mine-detecting dog is becoming more popular, and other dog outfitters are starting up because of the success of RONCO. We have seen those dogs, and we have been called to reinstate those dogs. And that is not to say that other companies' dogs are bad. There are some good ones, but there can be a big difference in dogs.

Can you tell me about the Integrated Mine Action Support or the IMAS contract? Lundberg: We can talk about IMAS from RONCO's point of view, but we encourage you to talk to the State Department because we want to make it clear that we don't represent the U.S. government. There was a perception out there about this contract that, to some extent, may still exist. I had a number of NGO's sitting at this conference table to talk about the IMAS contract who were rather upset. It was perceived that RONCO suddenly had $250 million, and people wanted to know: Were we going to be sharing any of that money? That was everyone's opening remarks. They didn't understand what that contract was and is. The IMAS contract is an indefinite quantity type contract in that [the] State Department tells RONCO what it wants done via task orders. RONCO is not controlling this money or [the] identification of the tasks. The State Department is giving us their guidance, our tasks and what they want us to do. Some of those tasks involve procurement of demining equipment only. There are probably over 50 tasks since we started in September 1999. Other tasks involve services we are being asked to provide. Right now, we are in Kosovo; we have six demining teams primarily picking up cluster bombs. We are going into the Kosovo-Albania border with two fully equipped teams for the next five months. We are going into Oman to develop a mine detecting dog capacity, which will be integrated with their demining programs. We do whatever the State Department directs us to do. We give them a written response to their task order request. Then we sit down and negotiate about the task order. In a few weeks, we are usually mobilized to action. We are putting a study team in Lebanon, as we speak, that is going to work on the efficiency of a mine dog program in Lebanon.

What is RONCO planning for 2000? Lundberg: We are hopeful the World Bank will reappear. Not a lot has come out of the World Bank in the last few years. Its financial strength and relative influence make it a potential strong partner. The World Bank has taken some time off from demining but may be getting back into it, and, if that is the case, we will be bidding for those options.

Do you use any specialized Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)? Lundberg: We deal with Second Chance, a U.S. firm that specializes in this [Personal Protective Equipment]. We have had them design specific RONCO designs like the blast collar, which is a little higher and deflects the blast.

Crandall: We just introduced into the Balkans a new helmet, which is really just a visor. The visor wraps around and decreases the need for a helmet, which can be very hot. That little bit of a change improves a deminer's effectiveness by 15 or 20 percent. We are always trying to make the deminers' equipment better.

Is there anything else you would like to mention before we close? Lundberg: I would like to mention that in all the years that RONCO has been in demining, we have only lost two people to accidents. I don't think that you can find anyone who has been doing it this long that can say that. A big factor is the dogs. Safety is a major factor with us. We are very careful with the deminers we hire. They have to forget the cowboy attitude and work with RONCO's operating procedures; otherwise, they can pay the price. Whenever people pay the price of a deminer effectiveness by 15 or 20 percent. We are always trying to make the deminers' equipment better. We are putting a study team in Lebanon, as we speak, that is going to work on the efficiency of a mine dog program in Lebanon.

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