

October 2000

Superman to the Rescue, but Can He Teach Mine Awareness?

Margaret S. Busé

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Emergency and Disaster Management Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Busé, Margaret S. (2000) "Superman to the Rescue, but Can He Teach Mine Awareness?," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.

Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol4/iss3/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

SUPERMAN™ Y LA Mujer Maravilla™

han venido a ayudar a los niños de America Central!

Pero aun cuando ellos no puedan estar aquí, tú puedes mantenerte a ti y a otros a salvo de las minas.



genous landmines. John Heaphy, who managed DoD's efforts for the Kosovo and Portuguese versions says that the distribution of the comic book is being coordinated closely by UNICEF. "The comic book would not be distributed as a blanket mine awareness tool for children. It is being released through the school system. UNICEF is producing a teacher's guide to go with it that tells teachers how to supplement it, and they are doing teacher training. It is largely being used in the schools and is actually being used as a language training device and in teaching children how to read," he explained.

"I can think of nothing more rewarding than to know that Superman and Wonder Woman have leapt beyond the pages of the comics to save real lives," said Jeanette Kahn, President of DC Comics. DC Comics donated the use of the Superman and Wonder Woman characters and worked closely with DoD and UNICEF to make sure that the stories and artwork would be specific to the host countries. The Spanish comic book tells the story of brothers Miguel and Diego and sister Gabriella, who encounter landmines while doing chores. Wonder Woman and Superman give practical lessons on how to keep safe from landmines and what to do when after encountering landmines. The comic book also includes games, a page of stickers with landmine warning signs and a quiz.

Some people in the landmine community have voiced the opinion that the comic book may not be

and the results analyzed by the testing board, consisting of two representatives of UNICEF and UNMAS and two observers from ICRC and ICBL. The comprehensive evaluation was overseen by the MACC program manager. The report suggested that the comic book was not a suitable mine awareness tool for children in the seven to nine year age group. However, with appropriate supervision, the comic book could be a suitable mine awareness tool for children in the 10-14 year age group. The testing board recommended that if the comic book is to be used in schools, then teachers should monitor its use as a mine awareness tool.

The comic book started as a research and development effort for a Special Forces team deployed for demining support for the DoD. This is what happened in Bosnia, Latin America and Mozambique. "We use a team of eight or ten Special Forces soldiers," stated Heaphy. They have a language and cultural proficiency in the host country. The team will typically start working in the schools with NGOs and the mine action centers. For instance, in Mozambique, DC Comics gave us storyboards, which are large colored diagrams of various characters in the story line. The special forces teams use them with a focus group of 10-20 kids and see what type of reaction the storyboards receive, what characters are recognized or not recognized and what they think of the story. They also talk to the kids about their community—to determine who they look up to



c/o DC Comics

SUPERMAN TO THE RESCUE BUT CAN HE TEACH MINE AWARENESS?

by Margaret S. Busé, MAIC

When Wonder Woman and Superman joined forces to promote mine awareness for children through the efforts of the U.S. Department of Defense, DC Comic Books and UNICEF, the landmine community was divided as to the usefulness, and ultimately the success of the effort. Originally released in Bosnia in 1996, a second comic book in Spanish was released for children in Latin America in 1998. A third comic book was developed for children of Mozambique, but a release date for the book is not scheduled. Currently, the Kosovo version of the comic book is being released in the school system through UNICEF and through NGOs operating in the area. Originally, the Kosovo

version of the comic book was designed to be released for children in the refugee camps.

"From the Bosnia experience, we know that comic books are successful tools to educate children about the dangers of landmines," said Deborah Rosenblum, director of DoD's Office of Humanitarian Assistance. The comic books are designed to teach children to stay away from landmines and UXO, to recognize areas where mines may be located and to take certain actions if they find a mine. The comic book also encourages children to share their understanding of the landmine threat with friends and family members and teaches them that deminers working in their country are protecting them from dan-

culturally sensitive or appropriate in some settings. For instance, in the Latin American version, it was noted that Superman had blue eyes. Opinions have also been expressed regarding the appropriateness of using superheroes instead of cultural or spiritual beliefs of the host country. The Chief of Information for the United Nations in Sarajevo, Bosnia (1997-1998) said, "In Bosnia, children in the urban areas seemed to know who Superman was. On the other side of the coin, children in rural areas had no idea who Superman was."

A field test of the Kosovo version of the comic book was conducted by Prism Research, which interviewed 512 children. The process was supervised

and what the real structure is for passing information along. In Mozambique, one of the things we found out is that big sisters are very important often as important as parents because they are more available to the younger children and are often taking care of them. We also gave the children disposable cameras to take pictures of their communities. They came back with a gold mine of information for the DC Comics artists to work with. DC Comics then gives our team back a rough draft, which they take back to the country to test it with focus groups (small groups with interviews and questionnaires afterwards). They also get the involvement of NGOs, UNICEF and mine action centers.

The ultimate function of a mine awareness tool



c/o DC Comics



is to save lives and limbs. This can be a difficult goal to assess, even though there are pre- and post-mine awareness levels that can be measured. "We can tell what they think about it, what their attitudes are, what their parents and teachers think, whether they brought it home or shared it," states Heaphy. The humanitarian demining field is diverse, comprised of groups with their own special interests and strengths. Therefore, there are going to be differences of opinion in the landmine community regarding the comic book and its use.

Currently, the comic book has a professional quality, attractiveness and mass-market appeal. In the end, the book must be seen as one part of the solution for a very complicated problem. It should not be viewed as the total solution of the entire mine awareness challenge. "It should not be looked at as a perfect tool," Heaphy says. "Some of the critics looked at it and concluded that the Americans were merely spending money without much thought about how the comic book would solve demining problems. Well, that is not it at all. We hope that is not the whole story. We believe that UNICEF and many others can benefit from our development efforts. They should not be just handing out our comic books, but using a multifaceted approach to deal with the complex challenge of mine awareness." ■

SUPERMAN/WONDER WOMAN

c/o DC Comics

The humanitarian demining field is diverse, comprised of groups with their own special interests and strengths.

Therefore, there are going to be differences of opinion in the landmine community regarding the comic book and its use.

Contact Information

Jeanette Kahn
CEO DC Comics
Tel: (212) 636-5464

John Heaphy
DSCA
Tel: (703) 601-3655
E-mail: john.heaphy@gte.net