August 2001

Field Trip With MARMINCA

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

Available at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss2/24

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.
Field Trip with MARMINCA

In the field with the deminers of MARMINCA, the editor of the JMA was able to witness first-hand how centralized demining practices are coordinated and carried out in Central America.

by Margaret S. Busé, Editor

The organized approach to mine action in Central America results in a uniform, controlled and highly organized method in demining. All aspects of demining operations are supervised by MARMINCA and carried out by the national armies/security forces. Once a country is approved for demining operations through the OAS, supervisors are trained, dispatched and placed in a supervisory role over the local army at various fronts of operation in each country.

Col. Luis F. Ramos, chief of all of MARMINCA's operations in Central America, stresses that the strength of MARMINCA is that of a humanitarian mission under the IADB. The OAS supplies equipment, training, donor funding and coordination for all mine action operations. Donors contribute or pick up the cost for the demining of specific modules that comprise a front of operation.

The Supervisors have a unique, consistent and significant role in MARMINCA, and they are the cornerstone of the efficiency of the centralized demining operations in Central America. They have a one-year tour of duty as supervisors. There are currently 30 Supervisors working in Central America, with 19 operating in Nicaragua. The supervisors come from the following countries: 11 from Brazil, three from Guatemala, four from Honduras, three from Venezuela, four from El Salvador, three from Colombia, two from Bolivia. The Supervisors’ mission tasks are:

- Train new deminers with the help of U.S. Special Forces
- Give technical assistance with equipment, explosives, and destruction of mines
- Guarantee that demining practices meet international standards
- Update demining data received from different locations and prepare weekly and monthly reports that are sent to the IADB.
- Update the Tabla de Cheques (checklist)
- Certify demined area

Captain Curti of Brazil referred to the Tabla de Cheques as their “bible.” The Tabla de Cheques is an adaptation of the international standards for the entire demining mission in Central America. It is updated every year based on the supervisors’ experiences after nine months in the field. Based on the Tabla de Cheques they develop specific Procedimientos Operativos Normales (PONS) or standard operating procedures, for each aspect of the mission. MARMINCA has PONS for medical, destruction of mines, demining/emergency clearance operations and communications. It should be noted that they have already incorporated the new international standards into their operations.

Captain Siquiera of Brazil feels it is important to update the checklist because it is based on what everyone has seen in the camps and it has direct practical applications. The checklist is especially important for new deminers in the field. Every front of operation has different characteristics whether it is terrain or area to be cleared, i.e. mountains (or high tension towers) vs. bridges. All aspects are taken into consideration and are accounted for in the checklist.

To update the Tabla de Cheques and to aid in maintaining accurate demining records, MARMINCA requires that the supervisors record their demining experiences daily—square meters of area demined, mines found, metal found, accidents, etc. These

Contact Information

Russell Guevara
Joseph Rowntree Quaker Fellow, 15 Osborne Ave, Ashley Hill
Bristol, UK 857 9BL
Tel: +44 (0) 117 377 9999
E-mail: RG@trellick.net
Website: www.trellick.net/landmines
While I was in Juigalpa there were two violent outbreaks in the fifth front in a 72-hour period. Because it is a sparsely populated area, it is easy for the guerrillas to melt back into the population and into the mountains. As I was returning to the U.S., a joint military and police operation was expected to be deployed to quell the fighting. Captain Decio of Brazil is one of the supervisors of this area. They are currently working southward from Malakaluki but are slated to start work in the northern area next. He says they cannot start demining operations until the fighting has ceased.

**Organization of a Front of Operation**

The Third Front, Juigalpa, Nicaragua

There are 4 platoons (pelones de zapadores), 4-dog teams, a medical team and a communications team comprising the operation of the third front. Captain Curri, the Brazilian coordinator of this front of operation, described their methods. The desminador uses the metal detector and makes the first pass. The delsandeador, a local chief, calls in the sonoadores who actually do the prodding. If it is a mine and not a piece of metal, he then calls in the explostaina who destroys it in situ. Some of the mines they are dealing with are 20 years old and are too fragile to move to destroy at another site. There are 2 sapadores and 2 sonoadores in a platoon, each platoon is made up of 25 squads.

Captain Curri also described the three levels of operations within a demining front.

**Levels of Demining**

**Level I:** An area is recognized as suspicious either based on a survey, mine field map or reports from the local community. At this point, they do not enter the area, but they do all the background research needed for carrying out a survey. They review combat maps, look at incident reports, and signs of where the infrastructure could be found. It was determined that on average, the mines were only displaced 100 centimeters by the floodwaters.

**Level II:** When it is probable that they will find mines in an area, they conduct a technical study with either manual deminers or with dog teams. They survey and determine the parameters of the mine field. Curri stressed that because a suspicious area can be large, it is at Level II that they find the exact dimensions of the actual mine field.

**Level III:** Using only manual deminers, they clear the area going down to 20 centimeters in 5-centimeter intervals. The area, when completed, will be certified by the superintendentes. Asseguradores de Calidad Interna (ACI), or quality control, is carried out before an area is certified mine safe. A different squad operating in the same front comes into the area to do the quality assurance (QA). They choose a random 10 percent of the designated area and check for mines using dogs and manual demining. If a mine is found, they check the entire area.

**History of the Third Front**

- 1996 - developed a demining plan and carried out training
- 1997 - demining of electrical towers
- 1998 - demined highway and bridges between Juigalpa and El Ramos
- 1999 - Hurricane Mitch Emergency Plan - roads and bridges were checked so that the infrastructure could be repaired. It was determined that on average the mines were only displaced 100 centimeters by the floodwaters.
- 1999/2000 - revised plan and certified bridges
- 2001 - continue National Demining Plan

There have been 4800 mines/UXO destroyed in the third front since 1997. They also found 153,476 metal objects. As many people working in mine action are aware, demining is a time-consuming process. The stress level is high, the same meticulous steps need to be followed regardless if the object found is a piece of metal or a mine. It is not uncommon for the deminers to remove 120 pieces of metal in one day.

**In the Field**

MARCINCA's field operation headquarters for Nicaragua's Third Front is in Juigalpa. I was lucky enough to visit the area on the day that many of the supervisors for MARCINCA were at the Juigalpa headquarters updating the Table de Chefe. Many were eager to practice their English and conversations about demining operations could still be communicated. After a morning spent on detailed briefings by Captain Curti and Captain Siqriera, we walked the cobblestone streets of Juigalpa for lunch in a small restaurant that the MARCINCA staff frequents. The supervisors talked frankly about the stresses of demining. Many were looking forward to returning home in September. Captain Wilson of Brazil is the supervisor for the Costa Rica operations. Because he and Captain Decio, also of Brazil, spoke the best English, they did translating when needed, including ordering my lunch. The fresh ground tortillas, plantains, and sweet and thick fruit drinks were exotic to me and delicious.

The drive to the field operation went quickly as Captain Decio described the area surrounding the electrical towers that were being demined. The landscape was dotted with small shelters. Cattle, pigs and horses roamed freely, often directly in front of our car. We reached the demining site and a small group of electrical towers stretched into the horizon. The terrain was rolling grassland with low-growing trees and shrubs. The weather was hot, humid, and the occasional rain. I stopped away, my freezer exploded.

If these men are afraid, they do not show it. If they are tense, they do not reveal it. Many of the men I talked to stated that what keeps them focused is the humanitarian value of their work. Every mine found contains an inherent value of increased safety for them, the community, and Central America as a whole.

*50 photos courtesy of MAINC*