Behind the Scenes of Mine Action

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Behind the Scenes of Mine Action

Mine Action work involves numerous dangers and risks. Yet the field of Mine Action and the stark beginnings of a mine action center often beget warm bonds. Stories from men involved in demining show what sense of humor has served them well in dangerous, horrifying and noble action.

By Mary Ruberry, MAC

Introduction

"Because they were shooting at our building, we decided to have our coffee on the floor. It was very good coffee, and they were still shooting at us, so we decided not to stir another cup," Thomas Bollinger of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) relayed his mine action story blithely, illustrating a fairly typical attitude of the rare breed of men who establish and run mine action centers around the world. Mine action workers aren't looking for danger, but are undeniably engaged in a very dangerous line of work.

As the stories of these men often show, maintaining a sense of humor has served them well in facing stress and fatigue.

Gathering stories from the field has resulted in a compilation of absurd, hilarious, stressful, horrifying, heart-wrenching and noble accounts that allow a glimpse into the everyday tasks of a profession in which death maintains a specter of possibility. Formal training to prepare for a career in mine action and demining exists primarily through military experience. Almost all the gentlemen who contributed to this article have a military background, with the exception of Hendrik Ehlers of MgM (Stillung Menschen gegen Minen e.V., "The Charity of People against Landmines"). Nevertheless, as Paddy Blagden of GICHD points out, "Military mine field "breathing" is far afield from humanitarian demining. In the last ten years since humanitarian demining officially began in Afghanistan, many lessons have been learned the hard way, and the experiences of mine action pioneers have resulted in a new set of standards that provide a foundation for the future.

Cowboys and Heroes

"Someone just had to get in there and rescue him," John Kirby of the Ocean Group (known by most as Jabbah) describes his experience saving an 81-year old man from a mine field in Mokhambat, Zimbabwe. He had lost four litres of blood by the time we got him to Karanda Hospital. "With 20 years of experience in bomb disposal and mine clearance, John Kirby's act of risking his life to save another's is not out of character, but part of his line of work."

The term "cowboy" has been coined in reference to wild and reckless ways, and has subsequently been applied to mine action professionals for some of their "larger-than-life" experiences. Imagining Hendrik Ehlers in his tank on his novice demining run in Angola does conjure cowboy-like images. "So, with my life-long friend, Hans Georg Kruessen, we took off for Angola where we were going to drive demobilized, ex-East German army tanks into mine belts. We knew nothing about landmines until we found ourselves surrounded by ten thousand TM-57s.

Ehlers said that he is not really a cowboy because "there is a technical and managerial background. Yet in the mid 1990s he founded a club called the Landmine Cowboys. "You had to be somebody to be a Cowboy," Apparently the 30 badges that were distributed are now considered collectors items. About the cowboy image, Blagden commented, "Actually they're not cowboys because cowboys take a lot of risks. Mine cleaners take no risks they can avoid. However, Ehlers points out, "No sane person would voluntarily go to find out what the borders of a mine field are.

Starting From Scratch

Some Place to Work

"MACs are a positive influence on humanitarian mine action, and I hope my hat off in salute to all those people working in them throughout the world," Willis Lawrence's tribute to MACs is well-founded in light of the dramatic challenges encountered setting one up in a post-conflict situation. As Paddy Blagden says, "Life is not always easy when you start a demining center. What people don't realize when they say I'm surprised that you didn't set things up quicker is how infuriatingly difficult it was to set up anything with the complete lack of power, of sanitation, of any amenity and it was a battle looking out for your self and making sure you were fed and alive.

In Bosnia, "We were ready to go. We had needed someone to put our tiny bottoms, preferably with little things like electricity and sanitation if you could possibly manage it. And, boy, a telephone would really be fun. But this didn't happen that way."

J.J. van der Merwe of the U.N.'s Office for Project Services describes setting up the Bosnia MAC in 1996. "You arrive in a country, there is nothing. The whole city was bombed out. And then you have to find a premises, you have to set up your office, you have to negotiate your lease agreement, you have to buy the furniture, and hire staff, and it all has to be done in the U.N.'s way, and of course we were unfamiliar with the U.N."

After being offered a bombed-out "university building" to house the MAC, the Bosnian team ended up building the office themselves out of "corrugated containers, rubber-like containers used for shipping. As van der Merwe describes, "These are containers that have been turned into offices. Some of them are collapsible so you can actually take out some of the panels, and you can put two together."

Some time after, Blagden commented, "Actually they're not cowboys because cowboys take a lot of risks. Mine cleaners take no risks they can avoid. However, Ehlers points out, "No sane person would voluntarily go to find out what the borders of a mine field are."

Some Way to Communicate

According to Blagden, maintaining an effective communication system can be tricky even when basic needs are met, such as in Bosnia. "The only thing that was to make us do our own electricity which wasn't too hard because we had a little generator at the back. A big water tank over us provided us with the water we needed for the washing facilities and the toilets. But we still lacked a telephone. So they strung us up a single line [that] was strung across what had been a fairly large area between two barracks buildings, the Marshall Timo Baracks in Sarajevo. But of course every time it snowed the poor old cable gave out or it shorted or whatever.

Sometimes Blagden had to travel to communicate. In Kuwait, "The nearest telephone was six miles away. And in Mozambique, "It was down flights of stairs and then half a mile across a few streets and then eleven flights of stairs up to the building's top which was alright except that we had to send faxes and use the telephone."

In Angola, Blagden "used to have to queue up every evening for the one telephone line that went out from the camp."

Some Time to Relax

MAC workers also put in long days. In Kuwait, Paddy Blagden's staff worked "about 16 hours per day, seven days per week.

J.J. van der Merwe explained, "When you're setting up a mine action program, there's not much time to take off for recreation. You're basically working seven days a week. I don't want to exaggerate, but up to 18 hours a day."

As van der Merwe notes, "This was an international standards. You would write the guidelines yourselves, you would develop the database. And then there would be, according to the information you had at that stage, the design of the program, the different mines of demining assets and things that you needed because you would have to pay your own; or issue a plan on how to address this problem very soon because again you are reliant on donor funding, and if you don't do it quickly enough, the donors might go somewhere else."

Van der Merwe recounted the endless tasks associated with constantly re-drafting budgets and organizing information. "We had 18,000 records which the former warring factions gave us of mined areas. These 18,000 records had to be entered into the database. And there are so many other things like normal administrative things that you have to catch up before you can actually say 'now I'm ahead' and 'now I can sit back and just go on.'"

Military Training and Fear

"I wasn't afraid to go back and continue the work." J.J. van der Merwe told me after sharing his own near-death experience that took place twenty years ago in Namibia (the former South West Africa). When a 13-kilo British Mark 7 sent its cast-iron fuse through the belly of the mine-protected vehicle he rode in, van der Merwe was lucky to escape with his life. "I can just remember looking down and—you have to wear a safety belt—and I could remember seeing the sign to release the buckle. I pressed it and jumped..."
outside and the other troops were on me to put the fire out.

The mine fuse penetrated the vehicle, sucked in air, and gasoline was sucked into the cab. The three men sitting around van der Merwe died in the incident, but he jumped quickly out of the vehicle and sent a rescue helicopter. "I lay in the hospital for a day and a half for them to stabilize me before I was Medevac'd back to Pretoria." He then spent three months in intensive care recovering from 2nd and 3rd degree burns.

Van der Merwe's response of getting right back to what needed to be done—though severely injured—a result of his military training: "It probably could be sold in soldier training, conditioning. And you're used to looking after yourself."

Paddy Blagden says, "Another general adrenalin producer is flying. Whether it's from Africa to the Arctic to our own home. It's a job and a half."

Daniel Eriksson of the Kosovo Mine Action Centre said that his death was "a really bad day in a very bad year."

As van der Merwe highlights, "You have to find humor in any kind of situation."

"I feel very sad and sorry," says Ehlers. "I feel like I've delivered a baby. The hospital was being rebuilt, so the paramedics were assisting with the birth. Because the young mother had great difficulty delivering, the paramedic decided to perform a caesarean. When the baby came out, it was dead, and the paramedic fought for the life of the mother." Ehlers felt frustrated by her inability to be of help, so the paramedic asked him to resuscitate the baby "just to keep her alive. He'd left resuscitation on the baby over and over, but there was no sign of life. Finally, there was a slight movement, and the baby started to breathe. Both the mother and the baby were fine."

According to Ehlers, "There are several little kids out there who are now 'Emwe-emwe' or Enrique, or Jorge." Willie Lawrence described an unexpected response to clearance teams from a local in Mostar, Bosnia. The teams "had been at work for some weeks in the area and were cutting the vegetation away from the ground so that they could bring their metal detectors to find mines in the area. While I was there, an old lady was grazing her goats on the land some distance in front of the deminers, where there were supposedly antipersonnel mines sown. I watched her walk towards a deminer. As she came into the periiphery of his vision, he stopped work and began to shout at her. This little old lady marched right up to him and started to beat him with her stick. She was not pleased that he had and his colleagues were destroying the food that God put on that area for her goats!"

Comradery

"If we are on this earth for anything, it is to help each other and all the people" who have helped and supported me will remain in my mind," reflects Lawrence about his life in mine action. Blagden agrees, "Mine action contains a fellowship of like-minded and dedicated people. It is a pleasure to work in this group, and to know that I have long-term friendships from mine action."

As van der Merwe highlights, "You have to find humor in any kind of situation."

Working towards a common goal, mine action colleagues have pulled together under generally unfavorable conditions to create mine programs out of dust and generate a kind of brotherhood. As Lawrence puts it, "If demining is anything, it is teamwork and I have always felt that I am part of something good—possibly even noble."

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