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The Evolution of Mine Detection Dog Training

Dan Hayter
Global Training Academy

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The Evolution of Mine Detection Dog Training

Global Training Academy has been building Mine Detection Dog (MDD) capacities for years, even while they worked under skeptical voices and much criticism. Now, the academy serves as the main MDD sub-contractor for the Department of State (DOS), and has experienced many successes with their program.

The Beginning

Many training and search procedures have changed in the past 14 years since Global was requested to assist with supplying MDDs to USAID’s Humanitarian Assistance Program to Afghanistan in 1989. Global became partners with RONCO, who had a USAID contract to distribute food and humanitarian relief supplies into Afghanistan. Due to the isolated mountain regions in Afghanistan, RONCO was using a combination of trucks and pack mules to deliver the relief supplies. These mules were being trained at the Animal Handling Facility in Peshawar, Pakistan. During this period of time, Doctor John Ottenburg, a retired U.S. Army Colonel, was managing the Animal Handling Facility for RONCO, Doctor Ottenburg, the lead American Army veterinarians during the early MODs, Global was involved in the turnover of MDDs from the U.S. Army to the Thai army.

The criticism of MDDs continued in subtle ways, such as the suggestion that the commercial demonizing organizations were using dogs doing inferior and unreliable work. It was seldom pointed out that manual demining operations could not match the clearance productivity of those operations combined with utilized MODs effectiveness. Moreover, demining operations that used MODs had excellent safety records. In the last 18 months, I have seen a broader interest in employing MDDs, and it is evident that the GICHD Demining Standards Group has done much to improve the usage of the MDD. Global supports the goals of the GICHD to develop standards and provide guidance to all bonafide users of MDDs.

The First Dogs

In the fall of 1989, Global was contacted by RONCO, inquiring if we had the capability to provide the trained dogs and handler training. Global then began to put together a handler course and an MDD Program. The first dogs entered training at Global in the spring of 1990 and were deployed that fall. These original MODs were trained on landmines and tripwires. The need for ripwire detection was due to the heavy use of POMZ bounding mines that the Russians had laid in the high roads throughout Afghanistan. In December of 1990, Global completed the first MOD Handler Course. Our first 12 MOD teams were deployed into Afghanistan at the beginning of the Gulf War. Our next MOD course was started in mid-January 1991, but was delayed by USAID until March of 1991. After the return of the MOD Teams from Afghanistan, we conducted a survey of the handlers as they returned to the Animal Handling Facility.

MDD Operations

Mozambique

In January of 1993, RONCO and Global teamed up under a joint Mine Dog Program in Mozambique to assist USAID operations there. USAID’s goal was to assist in clearing the roads of landmines within Mozambique because the rural areas were inaccessible to the people. USAID wanted to provide safe travel routes for the rehabilitation of the farmlands. The road clearance also allowed the UN World Food Program to distribute a larger supply of food relief to the Mozambican population.

Between January 1993 and August 1995, Global and RONCO trained a total of 38 MODs, 42 handlers, seven Para Vets, and six MOD supervisors for Mozambique.

Rwanda

In January of 1996, a new Mine Dog and Demining Center was established in Rwanda. The program received funding through USAID and the U.S. Military Assistance Program, whose goals were to establish a Mine Action Center (MAC), provide training of manual deminers and establish a self-sufficient MOD Program. The objective was to make it safe for the rehabilitation of farmlands and the resettlement of rural villages.

From January 1996 until September 1999, Global trained 28 MODs, 40 MOD handlers, six MOD supervisors and four MOD trainers for the Rwandan military.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

In the summer of 1996, Global, along with RONCO, received a request to develop a mine clearance program in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was funded by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This program was to provide MODs to each of the three entities within Bosnia-Herzegovina. Each of these three entities—the Bosnians, Serbs and Croats—received a training package that included nine mine dogs and handlers, in conjunction with a manual demining capability.

Central America

In the fall of 1998, three additional MOD training programs began in Central American Countries—Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The MOD training was funded by the USAID and monitored by the Organization of American States (OAS). The original MOD handler training took place in Honduras with each country sending four potential handler candidates. The first MOD teams were deployed into the minefields in their respective countries in January of 1999.

The program within Nicaragua expanded to include MODs for the high infestation of landmines. The Nicaraguan military eventually developed the ability to train their own MOD dogs. They have trained two additional MODs and an additional one ripwire handler at their training facility just outside of Managua. Nicaragua received a training package that included nine mine dogs and handlers, in conjunction with a manual demining capability.

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Working With the U.S. Department of State

In the spring of 2000, the U.S. DOS’s Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs (HDP) funded RONCO and Global to train six MDDs to work with an NGO, which receives funding through the United Nations. The organization is known as the Accelerated Demining Program (ADP) in Maputo, Mozambique. The ADP’s program was the second instance in which HDP provided MDD assets to a pre-existing demining operation. The first time was to assist the OAS in Central America. The ADP’s program was the first where MDDs were specifically trained to work in minefields that had been prepared for demining use by flail machines. The use of MDDs in areas cleared by the flails has broadened the utilization of MDDs in demining operations.

In 2000, HDP funded a separate MDD (12 dogs) demining operation in Beira, Mozambique. This operation was to clear the railroad lines within central Mozambique in order to improve travel and trade. This project was completed in the fall of 2002.

During the year 2000, HDP funded RONCO and Global to accomplish the following tasks in Thailand:

- Establish a MAC and furnish technical assistance in training the Thai military to operate the center.
- Provide training and technical assistance in manual and mechanical demining procedures.
- Provide the Thai military Mine Dog Center (MDC) with training assistance in updating their MDD program. This program has provided 28 MDDs and handler training. It also has provided four MDD trainer instructors, who will complete their training in the summer of 2003.

In the spring of 2001, HDP established the Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRDF). The QRDF has eight MDD teams and manual deminers assigned. Their mission is to deploy to hot spots anywhere in the world that the United States has an interest in emergency demining. This group has been deployed to three locations in the last 18 months—Sri Lanka, Nigeria and twice to Sudan.

In 2001, HDP funded RONCO and Global to support humanitarian demining operations in the following countries, each of which was provided with MDDs:

- Eritrea received six MDDs in 2001 and an additional six MDDs in 2002. All the dogs are fully deployed in the minefields.
- Oman received four MDDs in the spring of 2001, with all dogs being deployed in the fall of 2001.
- Lebanon received its first six MDDs in the spring of 2001 and a second group of seven MDDs in the spring of 2002. Lebanon is scheduled to receive an additional five MDDs the spring of 2003. All MDDs are deployed working behind flails and conducting quality assurance.
- Azerbaijan MDD operations commenced in September of 2001 with RONCO initially providing six leased MDD teams out of Bosnia. One of the lease dogs was replaced due to illness in the fall of 2001. These six MDDs were donated to the Azerbaijan Mine Action Clearance Program. RONCO and Global trained local nationals to handle the MDDs. The second indigenous MDD handler course, which commenced in the spring of 2002, consisted of seven new MDDs. A third handler/supervisors course was conducted in August of 2002, which added three additional MDDs later that year.

In late spring of 2002, HDP funded a humanitarian demining operation with the military forces of Armenia. The requirement was to build a MAC, provide training for manual deminers and establish an MDD program. Seven MDDs were entered into training, and in September of 2002, five MDD handler teams completed training. These teams were deployed with a manual demining group in October of 2002.

Conclusion

In summation, the use of MDDs has become a very important tool in safe and efficient demining operations. Even though Global received much criticism about the use of dogs in humanitarian demining, much success has come from the program. Dogs deployed to many minefields around the world have greatly enhanced the productivity of the local manual demining teams. Having proved the effectiveness of MDDs in support of humanitarian demining operations, Global and RONCO are now the main contractors for MDDs for the U.S. HDP.

Contact Information

Dan Hayter
Global Training Academy, Inc.
PO Box 445
Somerset TX 78069
Tel: 210-622-9460
Fax: 830-429-3122
E-mail: gtaden@aol.com