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The Military in Mine Action: An Interview With LTC Bob Crowley, U.S. SOUTHCOM

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THE MILITARY

An Interview With LTC Bob Crowley, U.S. SOUTHCOM

IN MINE ACTION

Nicole Kreger (NK): What has the military contributed to mine action over the past 15 years?

LTC Crowley (LTC C): I can only talk about what we've done in Latin America, in the SOUTHCOM [U.S. Southern Command] AOR [area of responsibility], for the past 15 years. Even before 15 years ago, before there was a U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action [HMA] Program, which at the time was called Demining Program, we had Special Forces folks down in Honduras training the Hondurans how to demine. First of all, the way the program works is the Department of State has the lead. They have the final determination on whether we're going to have an HMA program with another country or not. So until that determination is made, we can't do any demining training. But when it is made, what we at SOUTHCOM bring to the table is technical expertise, and we've had active demining programs in Guatemala and El Salvador that are closed down now; current programs are in Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru and the new one in Chile.



So what have we done? We helped the Organization of American States [OAS] establish MARMINCA [Mission of Assistance for the Removal of Mines in Central America], which is an OAS program that relies on officers and non-commissioned officers from throughout Latin America in the MARMINCA Center, which is in Managua. We've trained deminers in all the countries I just mentioned, and in addition, we've built regional mine action centers [MACs] in Ecuador and Peru.

What we do from the Department of Defense [DoD] side is a Train-the-Trainer program with three components to it. We'll have a team of experts that's assembled in the United States that is comprised of military Special Forces personnel and sometimes conventional engineers as well. We always have Civil Affairs personnel and information operations specialists that

go down. The team will go to the Humanitarian Demining Training Center [HDTTC] out at Fort Leonard Wood where they will be trained to the international standard as deminers. They need to have that certification before they're allowed to go anywhere, and once they get down there, there are three components to the program. The first component is the technical advice and assistance in training: how to identify a minefield, how to mark a minefield, how to clear it, how to remove the mines, working with dogs—the soup to nuts of demining. But manual or even mechanical demining alone is not a stand-alone operation. The two other components are mine risk education—for example, I mentioned the Superman comic books [landmine awareness tools published by DC Comics in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Defense and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)]. That's the second aspect—the third aspect is in organizing and running regional mine action centers, which includes the database training that we teach as well as the community outreach and development that our civil affairs personnel work on the demining missions. And we're very close to closing out programs in Nicaragua and Honduras. Ecuador and Peru will take a little while longer. Chile has 273 minefields on their northern border area, and that will take a few years. But in Southern Command, we are postured to be the first regional combatant command that is mine-safe. That's a huge success.

NK: How would you say the role of the military in humanitarian demining has changed or developed over the years?

LTC C: Initially, the program, I wouldn't call it ad hoc, but it took Department of Defense and Southern Command awhile to establish the relationships that we have with OAS, to come up with the exact right template of forces that are needed for a problem. Right now, before any demining mission, we do a comprehensive pre-deployment site survey to identify exactly what the team needs to do when they're down there, and that's done about six months before the mission. During that period of time, the team is gaining the situational awareness of the mine problem on the ground, what the community needs, the type of training the partner nation military needs, and is able to go through a very programmatic process and preparation phase, so that when they go down, it's not a bunch of guys showing up saying, "Hey, we know how to demine. What do you need?" It's a thought-out, well-organized, planned and executed procedure with a number of check-

lists to make sure that we're not leaving anything out and we're addressing all of the requirements that not just the partner nation military but also the community needs. Fifteen years ago, it was not as well-programmed, and that's just a matter of growth and continuity of personnel in key positions and experience in the program.

NK: You were just talking about addressing the community needs—how does the community react or how receptive are they to the military coming in and conducting the demining operations?

LTC C: First of all, all of the countries in which we're currently conducting demining operations—Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru—these are countries that are used to having a military presence because our demining operations and HMA programs started after their conflicts were over. They have gone from a period of either civil war or international conflict where people are killing each other to a period where now the military is coming in and helping them get their land back. The communities are wonderfully receptive. It is absolutely unbelievable. We're received with open arms by community leaders and the population. We're there to help them solve their problem. The community relations is a critical component of it, and that's what our civil affairs personnel work when they're down there. I can't think of an instance where we've had anything but wonderful reception from the community—from the national level all the way on down to the people that are in a particular community of any size.

NK: How would you say the military approach to mine action is different from the humanitarian sector approach?

LTC C: That's a great question. Probably the biggest difference is that we do not actually conduct demining operations. We train the trainers on how to conduct demining operations. And that's a policy decision that the United States has made in which our forces are not authorized to actually pick up or remove mines. Our mission is to train the partner nation personnel in how to do that. Now, if you look at HALO Trust or MAG [the Mines Advisory Group]—a number of the NGOs [non-governmental organizations] go out and they actually conduct the demining operations themselves. Our focus really is on capacity building in the demining area and not the conduct of the demining operations.

NK: When you're saying that you train the trainers, are you usually training the in-country military?

LTC C: Yes, we are. And in the case of MARMINCA, for example, MARMINCA again is an OAS organization, but that's an international group of military personnel. Our focus for the procedures, the actual demining operations, yes, we are training the other militaries on how to demine in their own country.

NK: What would you say are the benefits or drawbacks of using military forces as opposed to an NGO or a corporate organization carrying out demining?

LTC C: First of all, I think it's right that the military has the lead responsibility for demining within their own country. The mines are

there as a result of what had been a military problem, and I think it's most appropriate that the military take care of that problem. I respect the Dickens out of NGOs that do it. It's a wonderful humanitarian piece. But I would rather see somebody in uniform risking his life to do it because it's a military problem, rather than seeing an NGO lose their life or limb. And hopefully our training is such that we won't have accidents where the deminers wind up getting hurt.

NK: Can you give me an example of a success story that you know of of the military in humanitarian demining?

LTC C: The biggest success story we're going to have in the SOUTHCOM area is coming up. Ecuador and Peru were fighting a border war in 1994. Following their ceasefire agreement, the United Nations established the United Nations Mission to Ecuador and Peru (UNMEP). Now, there are still tensions in that area between Ecuador and Peru. It's been a disputed border; the ceasefire agreement reestablished the border. But, later on this year—and we're looking at the fourth quarter—we're going to be conducting a humanitarian mine action mission that is not bilateral in nature. Most of them are—we go to country "X" and work with those people. In this case, we're going to have deminers from Ecuador and Peru train at the Peruvian Engineer School. We will train them in demining tactics, techniques and procedures. Then we will go up to the border area, the Peru/Ecuador border, and those deminers will conduct demining operations on both sides of the border. What does that mean? That means Peruvians are going to be demining Ecuador and Ecuadorians are going to be demining Peru. And then from there, we'll go to Quito, Ecuador, where we'll conduct some follow-on training. That is a multilateral as opposed to a bilateral mission. Absolutely a huge success, and we're looking towards fourth quarter of this year to execute that mission.

NK: Do you think it is important for mine action programs to have visiting military Technical Advisors?

LTC C: It depends on the capabilities of what they have.... Not always. You take a look at Honduras and Nicaragua, right now those programs are almost complete. There are Nicaraguan deminers right now in Iraq that were trained by the United States military. Now those guys are as good as anybody. Do they need us now to tell them how to demine? No. They don't need our assistance at this point. So it depends on the maturity of the program that they have in their particular country. I expect when we get down to Chile and start the program in Chile in 2005, they've got a very professional army, so our technical assistance will hopefully be relatively limited and we won't have to start at the ground floor with the Chileans. So it depends on the capabilities and the particular situation in any given country.

NK: How do you feel the train-the-trainers program has helped our military and host nations?

LTC C: One of the ancillary benefits we get from any operation we do of this nature is the individual contacts and bonding, for lack of a better word, that occurs between professionals. Whether they're mili-

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

tary professionals or whether they're doctors that are doing an exchange or academics, it doesn't matter. There's a cultural understanding and growth that occurs through this program and our other humanitarian programs that, in the long term, is a huge, huge benefit. So the individual contacts and mutual understanding that develop are as valuable as anything else.

NK: What role do you think the military can play in standards for demining technology?

LTC C: I think the roles that we have right now with the HDTC doing the training they do, plus the OSD SO/LIC [Office of the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict] research and development folks do absolutely tremendous work. I wouldn't say it needs to be adjusted. They will go to a country, look at a particular situation in terms of terrain, weather, where the communities are located—any number of factors—and they'll look at it and say, "You know what might help here is a piece of equipment or some sort of technology that could do this." Well whatever it is they think would work best doesn't exist, so they will go manufacture that, and they'll take it down to this country and they'll test it. And the Office of the Secretary of Defense fully funds that program. We've got equipment down in Honduras right now that they're doing a final test on. The benefits to the partner nation are absolutely tremendous, and from a technology standpoint, it's those guys who work out of OSD SO/LIC at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, that bring a huge amount to the table, whether it's experimenting with unmanned aerial vehicles, with ground penetrating radar to identify mines—those are tremendous technological advances that we can capitalize on.

NK: What do you think is the role for the military in mine risk education and victim assistance?

LTC C: That's two separate questions, so I'd like to answer each separately. In mine risk education, our role is to work with the communities and through the community leaders to help them develop a good solid mine risk education program. You know, kids are kids, and so often, as you know, children are the victims of landmines; people working in the agricultural community are the victims of landmines. Our role is to help the communities in which they live develop strong programs that are coherent, that receive the necessary funding, that are well enough put together so that they're sustained, thereby reducing the number of landmine victims while the deminers go ahead and get an area cleared of mines.

The other question ... that is a great question, and I was talking to the guys from the Polus Center, because in the HMA Program we really don't have a role in victim assistance. But we have other programs within Southern Command that can assist with that. We have a humanitarian assistance program. We have humanitarian and civic assistance programs. I would see an example of an organization like the Polus Center working in Leon, Nicaragua, where we've also worked, primarily after Hurricane Mitch, when Southern Command provided both immediate and long-term disaster relief and reconstruction to Central America. In Leon, they have a victim assistance center that needs renovation or they're trying to build a new one.

We have DoD-funded programs that can help with that type of thing, and that's the type of partnership that I think really goes a long way to the mutual benefit of everybody concerned—the United States, the partner nation, the NGOs we partner with, the United States military, the partner nation military, and the ultimate beneficiary being the members of the community that live there. That's where I think we can make the most money and get the most yardage out of this program.

NK: Do you think the military is better suited for mine action than the humanitarian sector?

LTC C: I wouldn't say that at all. I would say there are professionals in the humanitarian sector, and I would say there are professionals in the military. We are not at all interested in competing. We're interested in working together to solve mutual problems that affect the world community.

NK: That was something you spoke about earlier—partnerships and how important they are. I was wondering how you think the military can complement other organizations working in humanitarian demining.

LTC C: When I was just mentioning the humanitarian assistance program, I think that's a great example. We've partnered with a number of NGOs throughout the region already, both international NGOs, the larger ones, as well as local, community-based civic action groups. Our partnership opportunities are more limited by imagination than they are by funding. Now, we certainly have some real-world concerns; we can't, from a military standpoint, say, "OK, let's go do this type of project in this area" just because somebody's asked us to, but there are many, many cases where there is a confluence of interest, and those need to be pursued vigorously to make sure that we generate a sort of synergy through the confluence of interest and maximize all of our capabilities to achieve whatever particular objective it may be at the time—whether it's education, whether it's health, whether it's, as you mentioned, victim assistance, that's another area that partnerships are certainly viable.

* Photo clo MAIC.

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