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Humanitarian vs. Military MINE ACTION

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and commercial companies are well-known in the mine action community for conducting demining operations all over the world. But there is another breed of deminer that is becoming more and more common—the military. Militaries often have different objectives, tactics, opinions and experiences from professional mine action practitioners, which is frequently reflected in the way they conduct clearance operations. Can two groups so different find some common ground and work towards a world in which they not only coexist, but actually work in tandem to assist one another in carrying out demining?

What Role Should the Military Play?

One contentious topic of debate is whether or not militaries should even be involved in mine action and if so, what exactly their role should be. Because the level of military involvement in mine action currently varies widely from region to region, there are many different views on the subject. There are those that believe their role should be limited, like Hugh Morris of MineTech International, who says, “I don’t think the military have a role in mine action other than in a conflict situation where they cannot bring in commercial [organizations] or NGOs. I think the military have a role to secure their own force protection aims, be able to allow movement of their forces and maybe movement of civilians and movement of refugees. But when it is a post-conflict situation, the military should move on to other tasks, because they’re not civil administrators and they’re not geared to do tasks of a humanitarian mine clearing nature. It requires a lot of men and a lot of time, and I don’t believe any military has the time to do it. So I don’t think they have a role in a post-

conflict situation in any country in the world to clear landmines.”¹ He stresses that although the military, being paid for by the government, may be able to do such tasks for less money, if they are not properly trained and knowledgeable on international standards, then they will not be as effective as commercial or non-governmental organizations. Morris says, “The military have nothing but a military role in clearing mines, and then your NGOs and commercial companies are the ones who will tidy up in a post-conflict situation, unless there is money put into the military, and they’d have to adhere to the International Mine Action Standards [IMAS].”¹

Chuck Meadows of PeaceTrees Vietnam believes that the military should be more involved in the actual clearance of mines: “In my view, any military in any country, their role should be in the removal of any mines ... that they may have used or put down in any conflict that they have been engaged in. Then, in their own countries, I think they would be the appropriate ones to assist in the removal of any landmines that any insurgents,

rebels or terrorists, or anybody else have in fact put in the ground.”² John Wilkinson of RONCO also sees the role of the military as one of involvement in clearance, but in addition he emphasizes that their involvement in this aspect of mine action is more appropriate than in other aspects such as mine risk education (MRE): “... I think that the mine action in terms of the removal of the mines as opposed to MRE is probably more a role for the military to play.”³

Another view is that the military should mainly be involved in the “behind-the-scenes” of mine action, such as providing training, equipment, logistics and planning. Paddy Blagden, an independent consultant of International Mine Action believes this to be best type of involvement in mine action for the military: “There’s so much that the military can do to help the NGOs even without getting near a minefield, and that I’d be far more happy with, because I don’t like seeing soldiers being pushed into doing mine clearance because it’s part of their military duty.”⁴

Collaborators or Competitors?

With the military working in many areas alongside non-military mine action practitioners, one might wonder if they see one another as collaborators or competitors. The overall feeling in the mine action community seems to be that the military is not in competition with NGOs and commercial organizations. One reason for this cited by a number of non-military mine action practitioners is that NGOs and commercial companies often hire ex-military personnel for their mine action work. John Wilkinson sums it up as follows: “...[L]et’s face it—many of the people we hire and that everybody else hires are former military, especially to run our field operations. So I’ve never thought that there was a sort of hard and fast division between the two;

I think there’s different areas of interest, different areas of access, different areas of understanding, but all of them can be bridged and can be made to work in a complementary manner.”³

Some non-military mine action workers cite particular cases in which their organizations are working with the military in a harmonious way. As an example of how the two can work hand-in-hand Paddy Blagden tells a story of a Japanese NGO working in Thailand

“...I’ve never thought that there was a sort of hard and fast division between [the military and NGOs]; I think there’s different areas of interest, different areas of access, different areas of understanding, but all of them can be bridged and can be made to work in a complementary manner.”

alongside one of the Thailand Mine Action Center’s (TMAC’s) Humanitarian Mine Action Units (HMAUs), which are composed of members of the Thai army. The HMAU was often unable to use its machines, so the NGO would borrow them, making sure that when the machines were returned, the HMAU could carry on its work with a fully fueled and serviced machine. Thus, the NGO’s deminers could use a piece of equipment too expensive for them to own for only the cost of fuel and servicing. “And this synergistic relationship worked—we got enormous assistance from the army as a result,”⁴ Blagden says.

John Wilkinson says that when RONCO first began working with the U.S. military in Afghanistan, they weren’t sure how to work together, partly because the military didn’t really understand the process of demining and its value. It didn’t take long, though, as he explains: “... [A]s soon as we started working, they understood the value of demining, when we started finding unexploded ordnance and landmines that have been missed by the more cursory ‘mine-clearing’ techniques.”³ But this progress was all but lost when that unit’s rotation ended, and RONCO had to start over with the incoming unit. Soon, however, RONCO’s value was recognized: “... [B]y the time the third unit came in, our presence had been established sufficiently long, and there was enough history of what we’d been clearing and to what effect that the arriving unit immediately said, ‘We want you guys to stay, we want you to continue doing what you’re doing.’ ... [T]hey understood the role that we were playing for them even though we were not of them.”³

What Does the Military Bring to the Table?

So what advantage, if any, is there to having the military involved in mine action? As in the example of Thailand mentioned above, some militaries may have tools at their disposal that are too expensive for NGOs themselves to purchase. As John Wilkinson points out, “they have much larger resources; they have the trained EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] people.”³ If militaries and non-military organizations can work out ways to share these tools, as in the TMAC example, such a partnership can be mutually beneficial to both.

Militaries also may have some more figurative “tools” from

which non-military organizations could benefit. According to Chuck Meadows, “The biggest tool they would have is just experience and training, because in the militaries that I’ve been associated with, part of that organization are EOD folks and engineers that are trained to do that, whereas an NGO by ourselves might not have that personal experience.”² On the other hand, John Wilkinson says, “[I]t’s more of an organizational concept that they have to bring rather than experience.... [Y]ou’ve got a hierarchical system in the military, which, when it is given a mission or undertakes a mission, will turn to and put a lot of resources against and focus its attention on it. I think that organizational structure is something that we in the NGO community could benefit from in terms of how we approach things.... So I think that more what they have to bring is the organizational approach and the way they focus logistics and effort on a particular task.”³

Facing the Challenges

Though militaries can be a valuable resource if they use their assets to mount collaborative efforts with non-military groups, there are still a number of challenges when involving the military in mine action. Perhaps one of the most fundamental is the opinions and prejudices that each group has towards the other. Hugh Morris notes that “...soldiers more often than not consider civilians to be a necessary evil and so are uncomfortable in their presence.”¹ Also, even though non-military organizations may have more experience in humanitarian roles, soldiers may resist learning from civilians. As a former military member himself, Paddy Blagden understands this attitude: “...I can tell you as an ex-military that no military man likes to learn from [civilians].... The last thing you want is a tree-hugger coming along and telling you how to do your business.”⁴ However, he thinks the military men would do well to overcome their unwillingness to learn from civilians, “because I think they would learn quite a lot.... I think that if they can overcome this unwillingness by realizing that they will save lives if they learn from people who are mine clearing the whole time as professionals, then I think it’ll help enormously. If they won’t, then I’m afraid they’ve got to learn the ways that we did (i.e., by making a large number of mistakes), but that is a very painful process, and quite a lot of people can directly suffer as a result.”⁴ On the other hand, as Mr. Wilkinson articulates, non-military organizations can be just as guilty of such prejudice: “...[I]t requires a change of attitude and a change of understanding on the part of the military. It also in some ways requires a change in attitude on the part of the NGOs—some NGOs prefer ‘not to deal with the military.’ Well, the

“... I think the military are being driven by the Bosnians, the Iraqs, the Kuwaits, these kind of containment and security operations—Afghanistan is another one—to think more and more about the kind of mine clearance that they’re going to be asked to do. And I think eventually they will come around to being much nearer to the NGOs’ way of doing things and the commercial companies’ way of doing things.”

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

way things are going in terms of military presences, military interests, people working basically on either side of the wire from each other, that makes very little sense.”³ Paddy Blagden agrees: “I agree fully ... that NGOs sometimes dislike soldiers as much as the other way round, but it depends very much on personalities within both organizations.”⁵ The first step to successful cooperation is for both sides to swallow their pride and be willing to admit that the other has a lot to offer. This step will probably be aided enormously by the fact that a lot of NGOs and commercial organizations are comprised of some former military themselves, which should create opportunities to initially bridge the gaps between the two groups.

Another problem when militaries become engaged in mine action is that they often have different priorities from the NGOs and commercial groups. Hugh Morris describes his experience with priorities differing from the military’s: “[B]e we NGO or commercial, we clear mines to the International Mine Action Standards, and that imposes upon us a number of rules and a number of quality assurance checks.... None of those rules apply to the military, and the military will clear mines as an expedient means of creating a camp, getting to a target, or getting through a minefield barrier.”¹ Because of these standards, demining often requires more time and more paperwork than the military is used to. If they don’t understand the reasoning behind such regulations, they can be turned off by the way professional mine action organizations carry out demining. John Wilkinson states, “In many ways, a lot of demining, when a military person looks at it, it’s kind of like, ‘Geeze, it’s a huge reporting structure; it’s relatively slower than mine clearance; we’re not going to be here that long’—those kind of things. And then on the other side of the wire, when an NGO looks at the military, it’s kind of like, ‘You guys are ignoring too much of the threat; you’re just moving through and moving on,’ ... and again, we’re both doing the same thing, ... it’s just a different approach to doing it....”³ This remark also touches on another issue when the military gets involved in mine action: timelines. As mentioned before with RONCO’s work in Afghanistan, limited engagement times often mean that mine action practitioners lose ground with militaries when units change, having to re-establish their rapport with the incoming soldiers and possibly re-explain their work. Paddy Blagden reaffirms this problem: “The slight trouble with [militaries] is that although they are initially pretty well-trained, as with most army units there’s quite a large amount of turnover.”⁴ To overcome this problem, John Wilkinson says, “I think each has to recognize the other’s planning timeline and its areas of primary interest.... I think it’s an issue of coming closer together and people starting to better understand what each other does, how they do it and why they do it the way they do.”³

Militaries are also sometimes reluctant to share information with non-military personnel, which can create difficulties when trying to work together in mine action. John Wilkinson describes this tendency: “... [Y]ou’ve always got the issue of the military has a classification system and that, for operational security, they often don’t share information. I think sometimes it’s carried a little further than it needs to be or should be.”³ This is probably one of the more difficult problems to overcome because militaries have an inherent level of secrecy to carry on their work. As Hugh Morris explains, there is “a form of fear by various militaries that the various weapons that [are] dropped [are] classified weapons, and if they [haven’t] exploded, then we as non-military personnel should not see these weapons.”¹ Yet Morris

also thinks that the military’s tendency for elusiveness doesn’t always hinder information sharing: “[I]n some cases where it is not a contentious area, the military are pretty good at giving information to the United Nations Mine Action Centers [UN MACs] to pass on to people like us; but in other areas, they become quite reticent because they’ve dropped weapons that they don’t want us to see how it works. So there the synergy is not always that simple.”¹ Morris cites Kosovo as an example of a place where information sharing with the military is currently not bad, but he admits that his organization did meet with some resistance when first trying to obtain this information from the military.

Improving Military/Non-Military Cooperation

Obviously, there is great potential for military and non-military personnel to complement one another in mine action. There are a number of cases in countries worldwide that demonstrate such partnership is not only possible, but also quite beneficial. However, most would say that there is still room

“The old distinction between humanitarian demining and mine clearance and this is military and that’s civilian I think is breaking down to good effect and to good purpose.”³

for improvement. What suggestions do members of the NGO and commercial sectors of mine action have for improving this relationship?

Many mine action practitioners realize that there is a difference between the military and non-military approaches to mine action. Military minefield breaching or even what they sometimes call “mine clearance” are not the same as demining, and mine action practitioners think the military needs to understand the differences between them and why demining is so important. John Wilkinson states, “I think the military needs to better understand what demining is ... and this requires a change of attitude frankly on the part of the military. We still run into situations where people say, ‘Well, we don’t do demining, we do mine clearance.’ Well yeah, but, when you’re sitting in a minefield, you’d better do demining, or when you’re sitting in a field of UXO, you’d better do demining.”³ Because military and non-military organizations often have different goals in mind when doing their respective types of clearance, they may not understand why the other party takes a certain approach to it; militaries may believe that mine action is too time-consuming, while mine action professionals think the military overlooks much of the problem. The bottom line, according to Mr. Wilkinson, is “we’re both doing the same thing—we’re both removing mines and detecting and hopefully picking up UXO, it’s just a different approach to doing it....”³

The disadvantage that seems to be most agreed upon is that many militaries getting involved in demining are not trained according to the internationally recognized standards. Chuck Meadows expresses this as one of PeaceTrees Vietnam’s major obstacles: “For us, the biggest challenge is training. It’s ensuring the initial training for the folks have been at the United Nations standards.”² Paddy Blagden calls for the military to “... carry out clearance to International Mine Action Standards.... I would say that until the military are capable of

doing this, I wouldn’t like to see them carry out all that much demining, except in emergency situations, and the reason is because in any one mine-affected nation, there must be one national mine action program controlled either centrally, or regionally but where each region is integrated with the other regions. [I]f you want to get a complete picture of the mine problem in any country, it is not easy and you have to have a central organization ... filling in the database and producing the threat maps and all the rest of it. And if you get an army working off on the side, not providing information into this database, but having a little database of its own, which may not be compatible with IMSMA [the Information Management System for Mine Action], then you’ll end up with information that is not getting into the central, national mine plan. And if that quality assurance is not done in accordance with the International Mine Action Standards, you’re really not quite sure of what’s going on.”⁴

Mr. Blagden cites the lack of following standards for major problems with demining in Iran, “...where although areas have been cleared by the army, there have been so many accidents that the contractors working there require the work to be done again by a proper mine clearance contractor. What a waste of time and a waste of funds! If the work was done properly beforehand then it would have been alright.”⁴ He also expressed his concern for the lack of safety of military deminers who do not follow these standards: “I am still though very saddened when I hear of accidents among the military. I’m especially saddened when those accidents involve more than one person in an explosion, unless it was an anti-tank or anti-vehicle mine, in which case, it’s quite likely to happen that way, provided the people were in a vehicle. The reason for this is that when six people are hurt because they were all looking at an anti-personnel mine and somebody was trying to put a pin in it or at least sort of make it safe, I realize then that there was no demining discipline taking place at the site, that the safety regulations were being totally ignored, that all the safety distances that are compulsory for humanitarian deminers were being also ignored, and that as a result, valuable human lives were, to be honest, squandered, and I think that’s a great pity....”⁴ He does believe, though, that militaries are starting to recognize the importance of following the example set by non-military mine action practitioners: “...I think eventually they will come around to being much nearer to the NGOs’ way of doing things and the commercial companies’ way of doing things. They are already in many cases adopting things like the International Mine Action Standards... [and] they are using the management software, IMSMA....”⁴ Hopefully this trend will continue so that the integration of military and civilian deminers can be streamlined for improved cooperation.

Although they may be reluctant to do so, militaries should be more willing to learn from the mine action community. Hugh Morris points out that because mine action practitioners do demining full-time, the military would be wise to learn from them: “...[S]oldiers that use mine detectors are trained in the use of the mine detector and they might use it for at the most five or six percent of their time on an operation, whereas a commercial deminer ... uses a mine detector for eight hours a day every single day of his life in-theatre....”¹ Paddy Blagden is also a proponent of this idea: “... I don’t believe that armies who try to do humanitarian demining look sideways enough at the humanitarian mine clearing NGOs and commercial companies who do the job full-time. Because I think they would learn quite a lot....

[T]here have been considerable developments in the procedures and equipment available to NGOs, and I am constantly telling armies ... that they would be very wise to look at the kinds of equipments that are being used, and in fact, quite a lot of them are sensible enough to have done so already.”⁴

Another suggestion for improved cooperation is for the military to provide support to the mine action community in matters the military may be better suited for than NGOs or commercial organizations and vice versa. Chuck Meadows, for example, believes “... the improvement is really one of being supportive of each other’s goals in what we’re doing. And in our case, that support is providing whatever the necessary assets. For us that means financial assets, it means equipment—it’s working together in a partnership where there is understanding that the host nation is still in charge, but being supportive of what their needs are.... [I]t’s not a matter of manpower, it’s a matter of training and then being able to provide the necessary equipment in cooperation with the other government officials that oversee that work and efforts.”² Paddy Blagden also suggests ways for the military to assist mine action practitioners: “... I believe the military can help the NGO community immensely. They have equipment, they have transport; they have barracks; they have training areas. None of these things the NGOs have in nearly the same quantity.... I believe that there are lots of army barracks that are available that could make very good NGO headquarters—just let them have a corner of the barracks—and there are a lot of army training areas, which NGOs need for training themselves. It’s very hard finding a training area....”⁴ Such assets would be incredibly beneficial for NGO or commercial groups and are a way for the military to help without having to commit its own people where it may not have the time, training or logistics to do so.

Along the lines of providing support but not necessarily “on-the-ground” manpower, some in the mine action community propose that military cooperation be more on the administrative side. Hugh Morris has had experiences with MineTech in which this type of cooperation has worked well. “... I do know of places where liaison with the military at the UN MAC level is very good, and that is where it should take place. And this is where the military should be encouraged to open up to the people in the mine action centers and mine action center managers should be selected in their ability to get on with and operate alongside the military.”¹ He continues, “I think that we can work particularly well together, and that should be encouraged at the highest possible level, and I think this should be something that should be put together prior to the next war, that civilian organizations, NGOs are brought in straight away to work alongside the military, operating in support of their main aim, which again is force protection, and then we can get on with our humanitarian roles of clearing up the problem for the local population.”¹

Conclusion

In many countries throughout the world, NGOs and commercial demining companies are finding themselves having to coexist with militaries, whether they be visiting or indigenous. While there are challenges to this coexistence, there have been success stories and relations are improving constantly as both sides start to better understand

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the needs and goals of the other. As John Wilkinson points out, "... it's the same thing, but different sides of the same coin,"³ and getting those two sides to work in concert with one another is key to the progress of humanitarian demining and will undoubtedly benefit both as they work towards the mutual objective of a world safe from mines and UXO.

Biographical Information

Hugh Morris attended Sandhurst Military Academy and completed 10 years of military service in the British army where he retired as a Captain. He then joined MineTech International, where he was the Operations Manager, managing various contracts around the world (Bosnia, Kosovo, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Kuwait, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan), many of which involved working alongside different militaries. For the past four years, he has been the Operations Director of MineTech International.

Chuck Meadows is a retired U.S. Marine Corps Colonel with 26 years of active service. His organization, PeaceTrees Vietnam, has been operating in cooperation with the Vietnamese army engineers for the past seven years.

John Wilkinson spent 34 years in the U.S. Air Force (11 active duty and 23 in the Reserves), and concurrently with his time in the Reserves, 23 years at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Mr. Wilkinson has been RONCO's Vice President of Operations since October, 2001, following retirement from both the Air Force and USAID. RONCO has been demining with and for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan since early 2002. They also have extensive experience working with military organizations in places such as Iraq, Eritrea and the Central Asian Republics.

Paddy Blagden spent 34 years in the British army, and has worked in mine clearance since 1991. He has studied the demining activities of a number of armies, most recently when advising a Japanese NGO (JAHDS) in Thailand, where the organization worked alongside the Thai army's Humanitarian Mine Action Units.

Endnotes

1. Telephone interview with Hugh Morris of MineTech. March 10, 2004. For more information on MineTech, please see <http://www.minetech.co.uk/>.

2. Telephone interview with Chuck Meadows of PeaceTrees Vietnam. March 9, 2004. For more information on PeaceTrees Vietnam, please see <http://www.peacetreesvietnam.org>.

3. Telephone interview with John Wilkinson of RONCO. April 1, 2004. For more information on RONCO, please see <http://www.roncoconsulting.com/>.

4. Telephone interview with Paddy Blagden of International Mine Action. April 15, 2004.

5. E-mail correspondence with Paddy Blagden. May 11, 2004.

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