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Interviews with HMA Directors: Major General J.M. Cowan

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MAJOR GENERAL J. M. COWAN, CBE DSO



James Cowan is CEO of The HALO Trust (HALO), a leading NGO clearing the debris of war with over 8,500 staff in 24 countries. At a time of unprecedented, man-made humanitarian crises, HALO's work has never been more important.

James was a soldier for 30 years, serving in Germany, Northern Ireland, Africa, Hong Kong, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He commanded his regiment, The Black Watch, in Iraq in 2004 during fighting in Basra and subsequently around Fallujah. He was back in Iraq in 2006–2007, again in Basra. He took command of Task Force Helmand and served in Afghanistan during 2009–2010. He was subsequently Head of Counter Terrorism in the British Ministry of Defence and led the planning for the 2012 Olympics military security operation. His last job in the British Army was as General Officer Commanding the 3rd (U.K.) Division.

James left the British Army in 2015 to become CEO of HALO. He read modern history at Oxford and took a Masters of Philosophy at Cambridge and has a long-standing interest in military history and the Napoleonic Wars. He is married to Minnie with three children and lives in Dorset, United Kingdom.

1. In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing the conventional weapons destruction (CWD) and humanitarian mine action (HMA) community today (funding, strategic planning, governance, development approaches, staffing, political interference, networking of organizations within uncertain political and external environments, etc.); how are they typically overcome?

As we enter our third decade of work, the mine action sector faces two challenges: first, we need to fulfill the promise to the millions of forgotten people who continue to live in fear from explosive remnants of war (ERW). Secondly, we must adapt to the current and future humanitarian requirements caused by war; far more people are being harmed by this second category.

Legacy contamination. Landmines remain as dangerous as ever to the 60 million people affected by them worldwide, restricting access to land, livelihoods, and endangering the lives of those who live nearby. Despite this continued danger, funding of legacy mine action programs remains a challenge. We must respect competing humanitarian priorities, without allowing donor fatigue, or diminishing foreign aid budgets to damage our work.

The Landmine Free 2025 (<http://landminefree2025.org>) campaign seeks to change this narrative and reinvigorate support to achieve completion in as many places as possible by 2025. Completion is possible and achievable with the right financial and political commitment from both donor and affected states, but will take innovative thinking and agility to achieve. As such, we are exploring innovative solutions that have been developed in other sectors, such as alternative funding mechanisms and social financing that may provide additional support to mine action.

Improvised explosive devices (IED). In addition to legacy mine problems, the mine action sector is also confronting new contamination in many regions. IEDs are not new, and in the

majority of cases, they fall under the globally agreed definition of landmines. However, the new use of these weapons and massive scale of IED contamination in the Middle East and other regions, leading to a considerable increase in casualties, give reason to develop new techniques, training, and methods to meet the evolving nature of modern landmines.

Urban clearance. Linked to the proliferation of improvised mines and the changing nature of warfare is the requirement for large-scale, urban rubble clearance and reconstruction. The physical challenge of destroyed buildings, reinforced concrete, and booby-trapping create significant technical challenges on a daunting scale for mine clearance operators. HALO has begun to adapt to meet these challenges by developing new survey techniques for urban areas. We are adapting machines used for urban clearance in Afghanistan and other contexts, and developing pilot projects in Afghanistan to trial new techniques for clearance.

Neutral humanitarian space. The wars of the 21st century are more likely to take place in urban populated areas, where the lines between peace and formal war, and between civilian and combatant are increasingly fluid. With numerous non-state actors in communities, negotiating access becomes an ongoing process rather than a precursor to engagement. HMA operators must be flexible and nimble to be able to adapt, and change areas of operation swiftly in line with changing conditions, while protecting the safety of staff and communities.

2. Transitioning from the British Army to an international non-governmental organization (NGO), how did your past work prepare you for The HALO Trust, what lessons learned have been the most valuable for you?

During my time as a soldier I fought in Northern Ireland, Iraq, and Afghanistan and served in many other places.

I began my service in Berlin, protecting it from the Soviets—the war that, thankfully, never was.

I've learnt several lessons from that experience:

- First, the British Army of 1989 was geared for a conventional fight against the Warsaw Pact. Now it has changed out of all recognition to deal with the much more complex threats of terrorism and cyber warfare, while still being able to protect the UK against a resurgent Russia. There are parallels with mine action, which still has a legacy threat to clear, but I don't think the sector has dared to change at the same pace, and it needs to catch up.
- Second, the British Army teaches leadership—I see a sector afflicted by management speak. I'd like to see more leadership and a clearer sense of direction.
- And third, the British Army teaches Mission Command, by which it means trusting those who can be trusted. Mine action could usefully do the same.

3. During your career in the military, how do you feel explosive hazards clearance has evolved over the years?

War is, at its heart, an attempt to out-manuever your enemy. To achieve this, you need to move without friction, breaching natural and man-made obstacles. Conversely, you must limit your enemy's capacity to maneuver by creating obstacles. In the 1980s, clearing and laying landmines played a major part in this, but as war became more three-dimensional, the use of landmines became less relevant—helicopters, insurgents, and cyber warriors aren't very worried by landmines. Now it is the IED that dominates and, along with the proliferation of small arms, the mine action sector needs to reinvent itself to counter these two threats.

4. Going forward, what opportunities do you see for HALO and other HMA NGOs, and how well-prepared do you think the wider HMA/CWD community is for the future?

We need to be better at forecasting and responding to the world of 2049, not 1989. In my view, growing populations, urbanization, competition for land, climate change, biodiversity, non-state conflict, and threats to the rules-based international order will predominate. Mine action is good at dealing with the world as it was in 1989 or in 1997 when the Ottawa Treaty was signed, but that is not a recipe for future success. We are in danger of entering our anecdotal, addicted to the good old days—it's time to make space for younger, fresher thinking.

While only 10 percent of countries are currently on track to meet their completion deadlines, we are also presented with a great opportunity to increase the completion rate and make life better for 60 million people. With a bit of innovative thinking and increased political engagement from donors and affected countries mines could be eradicated.

As we approach completion of clearance in many countries around the world, the HMA community must be aware of the consequences of our exit. As humanitarian organizations, we bear responsibility for the impact of our presence or lack thereof on our staff and the communities where we work. We must therefore pay careful attention to how we draw down operations as we approach country completion or transfer over to national authorities. It also means there is an opportunity to do this correctly. This means exploring partnerships with other NGOs, which might be able to provide livelihood supports or training. It also means ensuring that there is sufficient national capacity to deal with any residual contamination, which may be discovered in the future.

The HMA community faces a challenge that every humanitarian sector wishes to face. Within the next decade, we expect that large-scale mine clearance operations will be reduced in many countries, in all but a handful of countries such as those in the Middle East.

The HMA community thus faces a dilemma and an opportunity. Should we pivot and expand the scope of our operations where we can bring value, or should we slowly reduce in size as we accomplish our goal of a landmine free world? To achieve your mission is the ultimate aim of every humanitarian organization. Nevertheless, to eclipse would do a disservice to significant and transferable skills of the HMA sector and deep knowledge of local needs and context. HALO's mission is to "protect lives and restore livelihoods for those threatened by conflict." While the nature of the threat may change as conflicts evolve, HALO's mission will remain the same. We believe our sector has value to add in supporting countries post-conflict and therefore could successfully diversify into areas beyond our traditional mine action and conventional weapons work.

5. While working in HMA, what experience, lesson, or event has impacted you in your role as CEO the most? (This could be a travel experience, people met/worked with, challenge, etc.)

Last year, HALO suffered a mine accident in Nagorno-Karabakh that killed three, badly wounded one, and harmed a fifth person. It reminded me of the extraordinary commitment that people in HALO and mine action more broadly make to this wonderful humanitarian cause. We could not do our work without them and I salute the sacrifice and endeavor of the amazing men and women who, day after day, go out to make the world a safer place. ©