TRAINING DEMINERS

Rodney A. Robideau and Lloyd Carpenter

Landmine clearance is a deadly serious business. The U.S. Department of Defense's Humanitarian Demining Training Center was established to conduct all training according to International Mine Action Standards, and to identify, evaluate, and teach safer ways to carry out humanitarian demining operations in support of the U.S. government's Mine Action Engagement Program.

Rodney A. Robideau, left is director of the Humanitarian Demining Training Center. Lloyd D. Carpenter is an HDTC course manager.

Humanitarian Mine Action is a field known for shifting paradigms. Emerging technologies continually offer newer and safer ways to detect and destroy landmines, thus saving innocent civilians from danger to life and limb. The challenge is to integrate such advances into the broader community that is addressing landmine clearance and to ensure that the advances are reflected in current training curricula — which the staff of the U.S. Department of Defense Humanitarian Demining Training Center is doing.

Established in 1996, the Humanitarian Demining Training Center (HDTC) is located at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and is the U.S. Department of Defense training facility for humanitarian mine action. Since its inception, the Center has trained more than 1,500 U.S. soldiers who have then deployed to 34 mine-affected countries to train local demining teams. In December 2003, the demining training center was transferred from the Department of the Army to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA). The DSCA provides funding and operational orientation.

The typical student for the Humanitarian Mine Action course comes from the Army's Special Operations Force

Honduran military Sergeant Oscar Gonzalez from the Alfa Command puts a red flag as a sign of danger where he found a landmine with his metal detector. Gonzalez is demonstrating demining techniques during operations in Las Canoas, Choluteca, 188 kilometers (117 miles) south of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Since 1995 the Alfa Command has found and destroyed some 2,189 mines as part of a humanitarian demining program. (AP Photo/Ginnette Riquelme)

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT DELIVERS WHEELCHAIRS TO IRAQ

Donna Miles

Several hundred Iraqis have newfound mobility, thanks to a public-private partnership that provides wheelchairs to victims of war, disability and disease.

About 280 wheelchairs, donated by churches and private contributors through the Wheelchair Foundation, were delivered to Iraq in December 2003 and are being distributed throughout the country. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), in coordination with the State Department, arranged and paid to transport the wheelchairs. A nongovernmental organization, Life for Relief and Development, is overseeing the distribution.

"This is a great example of private-public partnerships," said Judith McCallum, who coordinates transportation for humanitarian assistance goods for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. It's a way for DOD to work with nongovernmental organizations to help people in need, she said. So far, Life for Relief and Development has distributed the wheelchairs at events in Baghdad, Tikrit, Karbala, and the province of Wasit. Another shipment of 500 to 600 wheelchairs is scheduled for June.

The project is part of an ongoing DSCA effort to support U.S. humanitarian assistance efforts worldwide, McCallum explained. The goal is to strengthen America's alliances and partnerships and to build trust and understanding of what America is all about.

Last fall, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency took part in "Operation Afghanistan," a similar initiative that delivered more than 5,000 wheelchairs to disabled Afghans. The agency arranged and paid to transport the wheelchairs into Kabul, and the U.S. military provided logistics support on the ground.

"We are here to show the love and friendship of the people of the United States of America," said Wheelchair Foundation founder Kenneth Behring to an audience of more than 300 who gathered for the Afghanistan distribution. "We are here to show you that we care. Our hope is to give you hope – to help provide freedom and dignity so you can more fully enjoy life."

The goal of the Wheelchair Foundation is to provide a wheelchair to everyone who needs but can't afford one, worldwide. Since 2000, the foundation has donated more than 160,000 wheelchairs in more than 100 countries.

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(SOF) community. Graduates can expect to support missions in one of 43 mine-affected nations presently receiving U.S. funding. These missions range from establishing a new mine action program to supporting on-going mine action initiatives.

Special Operations soldiers are well suited to this because of frequent overseas deployments and their cultural awareness training. This is important because they often establish close relationships with their local counterparts and students.

During the first week of the two-week course, the curriculum is the same for all. It focuses on the basic premises of mission planning, U.S. policy, and the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) that were developed by a United Nations working group in 1997 and are subject to periodic review. All students are exposed to the rigors of demining with an early introduction to mine detectors and basic mine clearing procedures. During this phase, all students don protective equipment to find and uncover a mine within a one-meter training lane while simultaneously practicing safe and proper clearance techniques and procedures. Novices soon learn the difficulties and tedium of clearing vegetation, avoiding trip wires, and then readying a mine for destruction.

During the second week, students are trained for responsibilities associated with upcoming missions. Special Forces soldiers focus on mine-clearance skills since their job will be to train host-nation deminers. These soldiers arrive already equipped with previous training experience, advanced language skills, and extensive explosives training.

Civil Affairs soldiers arrive trained and experienced in working with ministerial levels of government. They have the program management and infrastructure development skills required for mine action. These students are given additional training in general management, the State Department's Country Plan Assessment process, the host nation's current work plan, and an overview of other organizations involved within the country. Armed with this knowledge, these soldiers are called upon to teach or assist in strategic planning, coordinate efforts with other mine action activities, and advise in logistical planning.

An Iraqi child operates his new wheelchair, donated through a public-private partnership. (Source: DOD)

Mine Risk Education

Mine Risk Education (MRE) is a vital component of mine action. U.S. Army Psychological Operations soldiers bring product-development skills to the table. They receive much of the same training as Civil Affairs soldiers regarding the mine action situation in a host nation. Additionally, they receive mission-focused training on MRE methods, identification of at-risk groups, and integration of community-based MRE efforts into a larger countrywide program.

Another group of soldiers supporting the U.S. government's mine action effort come from the U.S. military's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) community. These highly trained technicians are drawn from throughout the armed forces. Since they already have a strong background in how to dispose of unexploded ordnance, they mostly prepare for the type of training they will provide host nation students.

The Training Center

With over 100 acres of land available for training, the HDTC provides students with full-scale layouts of mine clearance operations. Some areas illustrate indigenous marking systems used in clearance operations throughout the world. A particularly interesting display shows how mines look after aging a few years in natural vegetation and terrain. Students can observe mines that have changed color, rotted, or even shifted position. Students leave with an innate understanding of how the effects of nature over time—including fallen tree limbs or heavy undergrowth—can make the deminer's job more difficult.

The HDTC staff comprises experienced professionals — most with prior military experience. They have extensive backgrounds in EOD, engineering, information technology, and Special Operations. Also on staff is a military representative of the Royal New Zealand Army, and a representative of the Vietnam Veteran's of America Foundation, a nongovernmental organization. The New Zealand Army representative is the only active-duty military member bringing his engineering experience to the classroom.

The HDTC sends its staff on military training missions and to conduct program assessments worldwide. Benefits of such out-of-classroom experience include first-hand observation and an opportunity to practice state-of-the-art techniques and tactics using advanced technologies.

The Center also benefits from student feedback. Recently, information operations students suggested new areas for training. In response, the Center sent a representative for training with the United Nation's Children's Fund and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia. The program focused on the latest findings in epidemiology and in methods to analyze and present public health data.

The Center plans to add two additional training modules to its curriculum. The first will enhance the ability of technicians to clear UXO in contaminated areas. Students will graduate with specialized, hands-on knowledge that will be used in teaching host nation students.

Another training module will focus on the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) -– the database managed by the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining in Switzerland. The module will allow students to work with actual survey data collected from simulated hazard areas and incorporate them into the IMSMA process. ■